VALENTIN GAGARIN

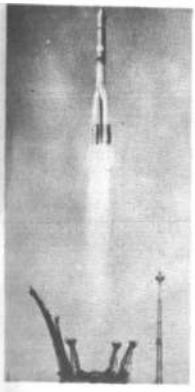
MY BROTHER YURI

Pages from the Life of the First Cosmonaut

MY BROTHER YURI is the stirring story of the childhood and youth of a peasant boy who grew up to be the world's first cosmonaut. This is the story of a character being formed, of Yuri's love for flying and his dedication to his dream and calling. This is also a story about those who guided him in life: his family, countrymen and teachers in the village school, the trade school, the Saratov technical school and the Air Force school which he attended.
Of the many fine pages in this book the most fascinating are those in which the day of Yuri Gagarin's flight into space is described. This was a day that was to go down in history.

Yuri Gagarin with his parents

1. School Testimonial and Graduation Certificate received by Yuri Gagarin at school
2. Yuri Gagarin just before his momentous flight into space, April 12, 1961
3. The Vostok-1 lifts off
4. Chief Designer Sergei Korolyov congratulates Yuri Gagarin on the successful completion of the flight
5. Newspapers everywhere headlined the news of man's first flight into space
6. Yuri Gagarin with his daughters
7. With young Muscovites, May 1961
8. Yuri Gagarin and his wife in India



5.

PARIS JOUR
L'EXPLOIT DU SIECLE
10 PAGES SPECIALES
LE FIGARO
l'Unità
Un uomo nello spazio!
Lanciato dall'URSS
E' in volo sulla "Vostok"
MAN IN SPACE

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8.

Yuri Gagarin during a visit to Cuba

VALENTIN
GAGARIN

MY BROTHER YURI

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ВАЛЕНТИН ГАГАРИН

МОЙ БРАТ ЮРИЙ

Литературная запись Валентина Сафонова

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The school bell pealed. A moment after the teacher had risen, the classroom became filled with the clatter and scraping of benches.

Recess had begun. It was the last recess before the last lesson of the year. The boys and girls of "6A" were clustered at the open windows. Each one was trying to get closer to the window and the sun, to get a better view of the street below.

Boughs of white and purple lilac filled every front yard in the street. The lilac was blossoming wildly that late spring, rejoicing in the abundant light and warmth.

When the sun is shining brightly and the summer holidays are about to begin, heralding a time of tramping along forest trails and camping on the bank of the Gzhat, it is a rare pupil who feels like studying. The most interesting textbooks pale, every lesson drags endlessly, and recess is greeted like a promised gift.

One of the boys tore a leaf from his notebook, made a paper airplane and shot it out the window. It was caught up by a wave of warm air, carried across the street and into the branches of a bird-cherry opposite.

Soon all the children were busy tearing pages from their notebooks. There was a great rustling of paper. Moments later squadrons of paper airplanes were flying out of the second-storey windows.

The boys were now standing on the window-sills, closely watching the progress of their own planes and those of their competitors.

"Hey, look at mine!"

"Mine's gone farther!"

"It has not! It's dropped."

"Don't you know it's doing a loop?"

"Much you know about loops!"

"Get lost before I sock you!"

"Watch out you don't get socked yourself!"

"Mine has a good centre of gravity. I stuck a matchstick in the nose."

A middle-aged man with a goatee was coming up the street. He was dressed in a grey linen suit and a straw hat and had a pair of steel-rimmed glasses on his large nose.

At the sound of all the shouting he raised his head, smiled and waved at the children.

That was when disaster struck. A magnificent orange airplane made of a notebook cover sailed in a smooth curve and then went into a nose-dive knocking off the man's glasses. There was a sound of tinkling glass. The man bent over and began groping for his glasses.

The children scattered.

"He's coming up!" a girl said in a frightened voice.

Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov, the physics teacher, entered. The man in the grey linen suit edged in after him. The class rose without the customary noise.

"Be seated," the teacher said.

They sat down in complete silence.

"Whose is this?" Bespalov asked, placing the orange airplane on his desk. It had printed rows of the multiplication table on the fuselage and red stars drawn in red pencil on the wings. No one raised his eyes. Each and every child was busy examining the top of his desk.

"Who has insulted this man?" the teacher demanded.

No one said a word.

The stranger was worrying his hat. His glasses were on his nose again, but one of the lenses was missing. He looked both embarrassed and lost.

The teacher paced up and down. He picked up the orange airplane and examined it. "Well, children, I'm not going to punish you. Your summer holidays begin in forty-five minutes from now. There's no sense in asking your parents to come and see me, either. But I do believe we shall part on unfriendly terms for the summer."

A general sigh went up.

A wagon clattered by in the street.

Then a blond boy rose from his desk in the middle row. His neighbour tugged at his trouser leg, as if to say, "Sit down! Don't be an ass!" but he shook him off. "It's my fault, Lev Mikhailovich." Then he turned to the stranger and said, "It was my fault. Please excuse me."

The man screwed up his eye behind the missing lens and peered at the boy through the remaining one.

"It was an accident," the boy added.

The children waited. The man shrugged. Then a kindly smile touched his lips and was immediately reflected on the faces of the class.

"An honest confession exonerates you, young man. I shall not hold it against you. One should never bear a grudge if an honest confession has been made," he continued with an elegant, old-fashioned flourish, addressing both the children and the teacher. "I was young once myself, you know. I, too, got into mischief. It's their age. You can't do anything about that. So I believe we shall excuse them."

Lev Mikhailovich nodded.

This time the sigh they all heaved was one of relief.

"We'll build model planes and gliders this summer," Lev Mikhailovich promised. He had been an Air Force pilot during the recent Great Patriotic War and understood the boys' passion for planes. "Now let's get on with the lesson."

"I'll be going," the man said. Then, as he was about to leave, he looked at the boy who was still standing beside the teacher's desk. "And what is your name, young man?"

"Yura Gagarin."

We learned of these events the same evening. As we sat around the table having supper, Yura's sister Zoya said, "I bet you were scared when you broke his glasses."

"I sure was," he replied and gulped some milk from the soldier's tin cup in his hand. Then he bit off a mouthful of black bread and smiled. "I was lucky the man was a nice fellow. In fact, I think he was just as scared as I was."

Now, after so many years, I try to look back and recall all I can about my brother's childhood and youth. Some things are clearly etched in my mind, and some have been forgotten, though not completely lost. Each trip home to Gzhatsk, now the town of Gagarin, or to the village of Klushino, where our family comes from, every meeting with my own childhood friends or with those of my brother, whether by chance or planned, my meetings with people who knew him closely, all revive long-forgotten episodes. These in turn set off the mysterious wheels of memory, bringing forth often scenes which lay slumbering in the secret chambers of the brain.

Thus it was that this book came into being.

The following pages recreate Yura's early childhood and our family's life both before and during the war. However, I wanted to begin my story with the episode of the man in the linen suit and the orange paper airplane.

You will see why I chose this episode later on.

PART ONE

WE COME FROM KLUSHINO

Chapter 1

A NEW YEAR'S TREE

It was late in the evening. Darkness was as a silent sentinel outside the window. The kerosene lamp that hung from a wire hook in the ceiling cast a bright light on the walls of our cottage, the large whitewashed brick oven and the table at which Zoya was doing her homework. "I'll go to the woods tomorrow and get us a New Year's tree," I said to Mother.

She had just come back from the farm and was taking off her coat. She sighed and said, "All right. It doesn't look as if Father will be back in time."

"I'll go with you, Valya," Yura piped up as he clutched my arm. "I want to go for the tree, too."

I visualised what it would be like with a six-year-old tagging along on skis over the wet snow. It would be hard going all the way, even for me. He would have to keep up, and it would be getting late, for I could only go after school. Besides, I would have to choose a good tree.

"You'll stay home," I said.

"No, I won't!"

"Yes, you will."

"I won't!"

"Stop it!" Mother said. "We'll decide in the morning. It's time for bed. Are you all done, Zoya?"

"I just have one more problem left."

She did the problem quickly and turned off the lamp. Now all was darkness inside the house. I could see neither the oven, the table, the walls nor the squares of the windows. The wind howled eerily in the chimney as the blizzard raged outside.

I lay in the darkness, thinking and listening to Yura's soft breathing. His bed was next to mine. I heard Boris, our youngest brother, gurgle in his sleep. Both the blizzard and the wind had come at the wrong time, for Father would hardly be able to cover fifteen miles in such foul weather over roads hidden under the snow and be in time for New Year's. And this was not taking his lame leg into account.

As luck would have it, Father had been sent to the district centre with a team of the collective farm's carpenters. They were to repair some buildings there. He had promised to be back in three or four days at the most. And he had been detained.

Besides, I was worried about the tree. As far back as I could recall, Father had always brought home a tree. This time it would be my job. What if I made a mistake and cut down a tree that was not as good? They'd all tease me. And I'd spoil everyone's fun. And anyway, it wouldn't be much fun without Father. Mother always said that New Year's was a holiday one spent with one's family.

Such were my unhappy thoughts as I drifted off to sleep. I was awakened by voices. One was speaking softly. That was Mother's. The other was a slow and rumbling one. That was Father's. How had he managed to get back in time?

I stretched my hand towards Yura's bed. It was still warm, but he was not in it.

I did not feel like crawling out of bed, for it would be wrong to say it was chilly in the cottage. It was freezing. I lay there with my eyes closed, listening to my father's unhurried tale.

"We left Gzhatsk towards evening. The going was not bad at first, but then we were caught in a blizzard. We just hoped we wouldn't get lost. When we got to Teteri we decided to spend the night there. The blizzard died down towards morning and we started on our way again. We all wanted to be home in time for New Year's."

"I'm glad you're back. I was really beginning to worry," Mother said. "Come, have some breakfast and go to bed."

"There's no time to rest now."

"Valya," Yura whispered in my ear. "Can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes. He was dressed, washed and combed. He was bending over me with an expression of secrecy and impatience. I could see he had discovered something that I did not know about and could not wait to tell me. He was excited because he had been the first to find out whatever it was.

"Get up, Valya. Let's go out to the passage."

The kerosene lamp flickered as it had in the evening. Now, however, the flame was not as bright, for the darkness before dawn is never as dense as that of the night. The wall clock ticked away. It was ten minutes to five. Mother pushed the large cast-iron pot of cabbage soup far into the depths of the brick oven. She drew her shawl tightly around her as she prepared to leave for the collective farm, where she tended the young pigs. Father was seated at the table. He was skinning cold potatoes, all that remained of the previous night's supper.

"Good morning, Dad," I said and rushed into the passage after Yura in my shorts and undershirt.

The frost gripped my naked legs, covering my body with goose-pimples.

A kerosene lantern with the wick turned down stood on a bench in the passage. By its dim light I made out the fir tree set against the wall. It was tall and graceful with its tip touching the ceiling. Each of its many branches and needles sparkled. The icicles had frozen to them and now reflected the dull, yellowish light of the lantern. Yura turned up the wick. Then he touched one of the branches. Some powdered snow fell from it. Beneath it the icicles burned and sparkled on the branch. One fell to the floor with a sound like the tinkling of crystal.

"Look at it!"

"We won't need any decorations. We'll just set it up like it is. It's beautiful," Yura sighed.

"The icicles will melt. They'll melt from the heat. And there won't be anything left." I felt sad at the thought and became suddenly aware of the piercing cold in the unheated passage.

Our cottage was at the very edge of the village on the road to Gzhatsk, the district centre. Father had built the cottage himself. It was made of sturdy logs that smelled of sun and pine tar. It was spacious and was set on a high foundation of field stone. My parents had rolled the large, unwieldy stones to the yard themselves, choosing them from among the many boulders lying in a distant field.

The house was surrounded by an orchard of apple and cherry trees, with currant bushes along the sides. Beyond the road which made a sharp turn near our house was a field that was covered with a white blanket of snow in winter. In summer it was a bright patchwork of flowers, with a humming of bees in the air. The collective farm's cattle sheds were set up in this field. Close by was a windmill. Farther on a blue ribbon of forest belted half of the horizon.

If you were to set out from the centre of the village, say from the schoolhouse, you'd have to go down a long and sloping hill to reach our house. This was very convenient in winter. No sooner would the first snow fall than the hill would become both higher and steeper. Then we children would make excellent ice slides in the snow, packing it hard with our felt boots. Coming home from school we would stop at the very crest of the hill for a moment to look down, shove off and—hang on!—we were whizzing down the hill, unable to stop even if we wanted to. Coming to a stop far beyond our house, I'd suddenly discover that I'd lost my fur hat halfway down the hill, or that my school bag was open and my notebooks were being riffled by the wind on the slope. Then up I'd go again to collect my belongings. Naturally, our parents scolded us for wearing out our boots so quickly.

That day, the last day of December, school was out quickly. We were given our report cards for the term and sent home, having been told that there would be a school party at three o'clock that day.

Zoya and I tramped home through the knee-high drifts. The blizzard that had raged during the night had covered all our ice slides with a heavy layer of snow. It would take many days before we had good slides again. The single file of deep prints that led up the slope had been made by us in the morning.

Yura was out on the porch waiting for us. He was wearing my old fur hat. As in all peasant families, clothes were handed down to the younger children. The strings were tied under his chin, so that the hat covered all but his eyes and his red-tinged nose. He had on a long coat and many-coloured mittens Mother had knitted him.

He dashed up to meet us, shouting excitedly, "I'm going with you! To school! To the party!"

"We don't mind taking you," I said, "but you haven't been invited. What if they don't let you in?"

"Don't be silly," Zoya said. "Why shouldn't they let him in?"

"Because he's still a baby. That's why."

"Well, they will. Ksenia Gerasimovna invited me."

He had a hard time saying our teacher's name, but he repeated it again: "Ksenia Gerasimovna invited me. Herself. I was skiing and she came over to me and said, 'Come to the school party today, Yura. You'll have a good time there.'"

"We'll have to take you along then," I said.

The three of us fell into the house. The oven gave off an even heat and the room smelled tantalisingly of fresh soup.

There, in the centre of the floor, supported by crossed planks Father had nailed together, was our beautiful fir tree, weeping water as the ice on it melted. Boris was skipping around the tree, clapping his hands.

We took off our coats and hats and, since we still had some time till the school party, began decorating the tree. Zoya was in charge, with Father and me helping and Yura and Boris watching. Boris was a stocky boy with a sometimes pompous air, and Yura never missed the chance to tease him. He took Boris by the hands, pulled him close and said, looking sternly into his brother's eyes, "You do just as I do. We're going to do exercises. One!"

Two pairs of hands, one quite against their owner's wishes, shot upwards with a jerk.

"And two!" The hands flew apart.

"And three!" The hands went down..

"And one!" The exercise was repeated.

Yura was after Boris like this several times a day, especially in the mornings, and their exercises always ended with Boris, who could not take the tussling, running off in tears to Mother. It was repeated again now. Boris began to cry, and Mother shouted at Yura.

"I didn't do anything. He's too fat. That's why I..." he explained.

At last all the decorations were on the fir tree. It was magnificent. And yet, something was missing. The fairytale splendour of the icy tree in the passage was gone. We sat down to our soup, eating it, as was customary in peasant families, from a common bowl. Cabbage soup was a part of every dinner we ate. Mother would often refill the bowl for us. By the time we had finished it was time to leave for the party.

Mother opened the chest and rummaged in it. We stood back with bated breath.

"Yura," she called. "I've made you a new shirt for the party. Come and try it on, son. I want to see how it fits."

We all agreed it was a perfect fit. Yura glanced at us suspiciously to see whether we'd tease him for being a sissy and then kissed Mother firmly on the cheek. "Thank you," he said.

There was a gift for each of us. Boris and I each got a new shirt, too, and Zoya got a blouse.

We hurried to change, for we did not want to be late. Mother kept looking us over critically, examining her handiwork. We were at the door when we heard her say, "Well, at least you don't have to be ashamed to show yourselves in company."

The auditorium was packed. There were strings of coloured flags stretched across the room. The walls were adorned with pine boughs.

I held Yura's hand as we made our way with difficulty towards the small stage. A short while before, when we had entered the building, the teachers had taken him into their room and helped him off with his hat and coat. Ksenia Gerasimovna had suddenly said, "Would you like to perform, Yura?"

"Yes," he had replied in a very serious tone of voice. "I've specially learned two poems by heart. For the party."

"That's very nice," she said. "You'll be the first on the programme then."

I was dragging Yura towards the stage, but he wasn't in any hurry. His eyes shone as he took everything in. It was all so new and fascinating to him, for this was the first time he had ever been to a school party. Some of the older children were wearing home-made masquerade costumes. "Squirrels" and "foxes" darted in and out among their friends, careful of their fluffy tails of gauze and cotton, while "snowflakes" and "snow maidens" scattered faint trails of gold dust from their headdresses.

"Who's that, Valya?" Yura asked.

"That? Why, that's Nina Belova, our neighbour."

"I mean what's her costume about?"

Nina had on a magnificent costume. She wore a long black dress covered with tin foil stars. Her long blonde braid reached down to her waist, and the small black cap she had on was crowned by a half-moon of yellow paper.

"That's probably 'Night'."

"That's what I thought. But she's a warm summer night."

Standing by the stage and twisting his red moustache was a dashing horseman with a wooden sword and a tall sheepskin hat pushed back on his head at a jaunty angle.

"That's Chapayev!" Yura whispered in awe.

"Zhenya," I said to my friend and schoolmate Zhenya Belov who was dressed as Chapayev, the legendary Civil War hero, "give me a hand here. We want to have the audience a good view of the actor."

Zhenya winked at us and disappeared. He returned a few minutes later carrying a chair which he placed on the stage. I lifted Yura up onto it. He did not wait to be announced. Instead, he shouted at the top of his voice,"Dear children! I'll recite two poems for you. Please listen, everyone."

Yura had trouble with his "I's", and this made his speech sound very cute.

The audience laughed and applauded. Finally, the noise died down.

"The first poem is called 'My Cat':

Tabby Cat is purring softly
On the window in her sleep.
Are you dreaming? Tell me, Tabby,
What do cats see in their sleep?"

Then he recited a poem about a fir tree. In conclusion he bowed three times, just like a real actor. Everyone applauded again. Before I had a chance to help him down he jumped off the chair.

Just then Grandfather Frost came up to us. He handed Yura a gift bag of sweets and said, "This is for you, Gagarin. For your courage and your talent."

Yura looked up at the bearded figure and said, "Thank you. Are you really Grandfather Frost?"

"Certainly. The realest one there is. I've come to your party straight from the forest."

"But why is your beard made of flax?" Yura stretched his hand towards the flaxen beard, but Grandfather Frost evaded him. He shook his finger at Yura, went back to the other children, and introduced the next performer.

At home, Father filled our glasses and, as the minute hand caught up with the hour at the figure "12" on our wall clock, he rose and looked slowly round the room. The oven had been made again towards evening and now gave off waves of pure warmth. Tiny wax candles burned on our beautiful tree. A cricket chirped in a hidden corner behind the oven. It was not an annoying sound, merely an occasional chirp to remind us of its presence. Perhaps it was the cricket's chirping that had made Yura and Boris drowsy, but more probably the unusual excitement of the day had worn them out. They were both fast asleep. There were four of us at the festive table: Father, Mother, my sister Zoya and I. Zoya was fourteen at the time. I was sixteen.

"The past year was a good one," Father said in his usual unhurried way. "May the coming year be as good to us and as happy. Happy New Year!"

We all touched glasses.

Father drained his glass, put it down and limped over to the wall. There the new calendar he had brought home from Gzhatsk and which still smelled of printer's ink now hung beside the wall clock. He tore off the bright top cover. The first page read, "January 1, 1941. Wednesday."

I sometimes wonder how I have remembered the events of that day so clearly. It is so far removed from the present, that last day of 1940.

The answer probably lies in the fact that the new year, 1941, did not bring us our expected happiness. The war intervened.

Perhaps, also, it is because that was the last time we were to celebrate the New Year together, as a family; my parents, brothers and sister, all together in our own house, at our own table, in our native village.

Yes, we were happy then.

Our childhood and youth have passed. Life, as it always does, has scattered us. Our parents have grown old. I do not see my brother or sister as often as before, and the one to whom this book is dedicated is no longer among us.

However, there were still nearly six months to go until the fateful day of June 22, 1941, the day the war broke out. Nothing then, at least not in our lives, gave any hint of the disaster that lay ahead. The days succeeded one another while all of us Gagarins were taken up with our various cares, our various sorrows and joys. I shall try to describe them.

Chapter 2

THE SKI JUMP

Yura was growing up to be a stubborn boy. At times his stubbornness took on unexpected forms.

I recall the day Zhenya Belov stopped by at noon. He stood shifting his weight in the doorway, then sniffled and said, "H'lo."

Father, who was a very tidy person, said, "Brush the snow off your boots."

Zhenya grabbed the short broom, darted back into the passage, brushed the snow off his boots and reappeared.

"Now you can say hello," Father said. "What's new?"

Zhenya was not a timid boy. "I haven't come to see you. I've come to see Valya. We agreed to make a ski jump, didn't we? Well, when are we going to start?"

"Right now," I replied, pulling my coat on as I headed towards the door. We took a spade and set out for the hill. Volodya, Zhenya's brother, was waiting for us there. He, too, had brought along a spade.

We got right down to work. Each of us knew his job, for we did this every winter. A bit to the side of the future ski run Zhenya and I shovelled away the loose top layer of snow and uncovered the hard snow beneath. We cut it into squares which Volodya carried to the ski run and piled up in a mound.

Our work proceeded faster when the girls, Zoya and Nina Belova, came to help. They carried up pails of water. The moment they poured the water over the packed snow it settled and, since the cold was so fierce, turned into ice as we watched. Ever new layers of snow were piled on top of the others and watered. The girls were soon exhausted from carrying the heavy pails, though the well which Father had dug by our house was no more than a hundred steps away. Our mittens were soaked and our hands were red and numb, either from the piercing cold or from our fast and heated shovelling.

We worked on until darkness fell. Our ski jump was magnificent. It would take your breath away to jump from it. We now had a pastime for the coming ten days of our winter vacation. Indeed, the fun would last all winter, until the warm spring weather set in.

The next morning began as usual. I was awakened by a shrill scream. Yura had got up with our parents and, becoming bored, had pulled the blankets off Zoya and poured cold water on her. I knew the next cup he'd fill would be for me and jumped out of bed. I was not mistaken. Yura was standing on the threshold, oblivious of Zoya's shouting, intent on dipping the tin cup into the pail of water that was set on the bench.

"I'll box your ears!" I warned.

"All right. I won't."

Breakfast was on the table. Mother had long since left for the farm, Father was getting ready to leave. There was not much carpentry work on the collective farm in winter, and so his job for the day was hauling fodder. He had on his padded jacket. His sheepskin mittens were stuck in his belt. He paced, limpingly, up and down, waiting for us to be seated.

"Now then, keep an eye on the boys and see that they don't get into mischief!" he said to Zoya and me and left.

We divided our responsibilities quickly and in the usual manner: she would look after Boris, I would take care of Yura.

"Come on, fellow, get your sled. We'll go and try out the ski jump."

Yura frowned and said, "I'll bet you're taking your skis."

"I am."

"I want to take my skis, too."

"You'll break your neck."

"So what? The girls can go sledding on the jump if they want to."

I was still eating when Yura got up from the table, put on his hat and coat and ran outside. Zoya followed him out. She soon returned.

"Yura's at the hill. Volodya's there, too."

Yura and Volodya Orlovsky, who was several months his senior, were bosom friends. They were also rivals. The competition to see who was first in everything, from playing games like ball and mumbly peg to who brought home the most mushrooms or berries from the forest and who was the fastest skier was fierce. If Yura came in so frozen that he couldn't pull off his boots and his stiff fingers couldn't untie the strings of his hat, but he was beaming and soon began tickling Boris or pestering Zoya or me for an interesting book with lots of pictures in it, it could only mean that he had got the better of Volodya Orlovsky that day. If, on the contrary, he was glum and unsociable and picked at his supper it meant Volodya had got the best of him.

"What do you care? Let him be first, son," Mother would say. "What's the use of getting all upset over nothing?"

"I don't want him to be first. I'll beat him anyway."

"That's right, son," Father would egg him on. "What are you teaching him, Mother? What do you mean by 'let Volodya be first'?"

Father's words poured oil on the fire. However, both boys competed fairly. There was never any underhanded business.

Now, when Zoya said, "Yura's on the hill. They're surely going to try the ski jump," I knew there would be trouble.

I grabbed my jacket and my skis and dashed out. But I was too late to stop them.

Volodya jumped first. As I later learned, they had argued over the right to be the first to jump and had finally decided the matter by choosing, hand-over-hand on a ski pole, with Volodya's hand topping Yura's.

Volodya got a running start on the crest of the hill and

shoved off, driving his poles into the snow. Then his little body bunched up. He was at the take-off. He flew up sharply. There followed what seemed to me like an endless, soaring flight. Volodya landed squarely on his feet, his skis sending up a spray of snow.

Good for him!

"C'mon!" Volodya shouted from the bottom of the hill and waved his pole.

Yura waved back, got a running start, drove his poles into the snow and shoved off. He descended the steep inrun, flew up, and then his left ski fell off. Yura dropped into the snow. He sat there staring dazedly at his right ski. The tip was broken.

"Are you hurt?"

"N-no. My ski...."

"Come on, Yura. Get up. We're going home." I took him by the hand and led him home. Volodya accompanied us as far as our house. The two friends and rivals walked side by side. They were both crestfallen. It was difficult to decide which of the two was the victor and which was the vanquished.

We picked up Yura's other ski near the house. That was how far it had slid down the hill. Once we were inside Yura could contain his tears no longer.

"Don't cry," Zoya and I both said, trying to comfort him. "We'll fix it and it'll be as good as new."

"I don't want to ski on a patched ski. You can't jump with it, 'cause it'll only break again," he said and sobbed.

Just then Father returned for lunch. We told him about the accident. Father was never one to coddle us, for this was not our parents' way, but his son's despair touched him. Besides, the family's honour was at stake. After all, Yura had lost the contest.

"Quit bawling," Father said. "I'll be going to Gzhatsk next week and I'll buy you a new pair."

"Oh.... Next week. I'll be sitting home till there and Volodya'll be skiing every day. I'll probably even forget how to ski. Then he'll always beat me." And he burst into tears again.

Father listened to his woeful words in silence. Then he winked at me and said, "If I'm not mistaken, we're supposed to be carpenters, Valya. Come on, let's go out to the shed."

We found a good plank, laid out our tools and began sawing and planing. By evening the new skis were ready. It was a fine pair, both lightweight and flexible. As I waxed them I listened to the noise coming from the ski jump. In the afternoon all the

village children had gathered there. The racket they made was terrific. I knew Yura would try to regain his self-esteem the following day and it made me feel good.

Yura was beaming when he returned home the next evening. He was barely inside the room when he said he was starved. He wolfed down his supper and then began teasing Boris and annoying Zoya, who was trying to read.

We didn't ask any questions. It was all as clear as day.

Actually, though, Yura hardly ever cried as a small boy.

Chapter 3

SPRING

This was Mother's wash day. She had moved the wide bench closer to the oven and had set the tin washtub on it. A huge pot of lime-water stood on the floor, with a great pile of soiled clothes beside it. It was no easy matter to keep a family of six in clean clothes.

"Bring me some fresh water, Valya," she said to me.

I took two pails and headed for the well. Yura tagged along.

The bright sun made us squint. I heard a strange, dull sound: tup-tup-tup.... It was the icicles on the roof melting in the March sun.

All was still.

The layer of ice on the rough-hewn logs of the well had turned dark and had become very thin. The moment the bottoms of the pails scraped against it a film of ice slipped to the ground.

"Look how small the ski jump got," Yura said.

Our wonderful ski jump which had brought us such joy and sorrow, too, had also become dark. It had settled and shrunk. It was difficult to imagine, looking at it now, that but a few days before only the boldest of the older children of the village had ventured to jump from it and such daredevils like our Yura and Volodya Orlovsky among the younger ones had foolishly broken their skis there.

Now the first black spot of earth had appeared over the crest of the jump where the sun was especially strong.

"Spring is nearly here, Yura. The buds will be bursting soon."

"You know what I want to do, Valya? I want to go barefoot on the grass again."

"That's not far away, either. And we'll be playing ball soon."

"Will we go to the meadow for sorrel?"

"Sure."

A roan stallion was coming smartly along the road from Gzhatsk, pulling a light sleigh. When it was abreast of us the driver, our Uncle Pavel, pulled on the reins. The stallion slowed down, bobbed its head, snorted and cocked a wild eye at us.

"Whoa, there! Hello, nephews! Is Dad at home?"

"He's in the shed. He's putting his tools in order."

"Here, son," Uncle Pavel said, pulling a packet of hard candy from his jacket pocket and handing it to Yura. "Tie up this wild animal, Valya," he said to me. "Be careful. He's full of fire." Then he headed towards the shed.

Father's brother, Pavel Ivanovich Gagarin, was our local veterinary. Our houses in Klushino were on the same street. Uncle Pavel was a very kind and generous man, a dreamer enamoured of astronomy, geography and poetry. I do not know whether he loved veterinary science as passionately, but he was considered a rare specialist in the district. He treated us, and all children in general, with a special warmth. Uncle Pavel had a knack for telling all sorts of tales, including horror stories, with a true artistic flourish. That was probably what drew children to him.

Naturally, Yura scampered after him, leaving me to tie up the horse. I was dying to follow, too, for I knew my uncle had certainly brought a bagful of news from the district centre and was now divulging it to Father. But the wild-eyed stallion would not be tied to a post. He kept baring his huge teeth, trying to nip me. It took no small effort to finally fasten the reins. Then I had to go for water for Mother three times and pour out the suds. At long last I was free to dash into the shed. However, Uncle Pavel was already on his way out.

"So long, Valya! I'm going to Prechistoye. They've got a couple of cases of mange there. Don't know how that happened, but I've got to see to the horses. Want to come along?"

What a question! As ill luck would have it, though, I hadn't done my homework and I still had to help Mother around the house. Prechistoye was quite a ride from Klushino.

"Never mind, you be ready next time," Uncle Pavel said consolingly.

I set to chipping the ice off the porch steps with a vengeance. Yura came up to me and said, "What's an agent, Valya?"

"That's the man from the insurance office. The one who collects the money and leaves a receipt."

"Uncle Pavel said the militia men caught an agent in Smolensk. A German agent. Why was he hiding?"

I stopped working. This was something strange and new. "What else did he say?"

"He said there's going to be a war soon. He said that's what people are saying."

"Go on! That's a pack of lies."

"That's what Dad said."

In those days in the early forties, our village, lost among the great forests of Smolensk Region, had little contact with the outside world. There was no electricity and no radios, except for the small wireless set in the village Soviet, but news of world events did reach us. In school we wrote compositions about the courage of the fighters for the Spanish Republic. We were saddened by its defeat. We knew who had helped the bloody executioner Franco strangle the young revolution. We sympathised with the homeless Spanish children we saw in the newsreels and with the Republican forces that had been unable to vanquish Franco's army. We hated the very word "fascism". We knew that Hitler's fascists had occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia, that they had annexed Austria and were bombing and shelling the cities of England. But all this was happening so very far from Klushino. Besides, we had our Red Army!

Someone knocked loudly on the window at dawn. I jumped out of bed. "Who is it?"

"Call your mother. Tell her to hurry to the farm."

I recognised the voice. It was the woman from the pigbreeding farm. Mother, who was quick in everything she did, was nearly dressed.

"Beluga's due to farrow," she said as she headed for the door.

Beluga was a sow, famous for her record-of-performance throughout the region. I don't recall how many pigs she farrowed in each litter, but I know it was quite a lot. I think they were even going to show her at the Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow.

Naturally, Beluga received special attention. She had a large farrowing pen and was on a special diet. The chairman of our collective farm would check her food himself each morning.

Even the secretary of the District Committee would ask after Beluga's health on the phone.

In a word, she was a wonderful, truly amazing sow. The collective farm received a considerable profit from Beluga's litters. The only drawback was the fact that she always had a hard time at farrowing. This was a time of worry and anxiety for her keepers, who always summoned Mother for help. From the day the collective farm had been founded Mother had worked with its animals: first as a milker, then as a calf-herd and head of the dairy farm. She had had many years of experience working with farm animals.

"It makes us feel better just to have you standing here, Anna," the younger farm women would say when they called her in for a difficult case.

We had come home from school and were sitting at the table doing our homework when Mother finally returned.

"Thank goodness everything went off well," she said. "I'm all in."

"Will you show me the baby pigs?" Yura asked. "Are they cute?"

"Yes, very. They're white and they have funny little snouts."

The next morning he and Mother went to the farm together. He accompanied her every day after that, spending all his time with the newborn pigs. He even stopped coming home for lunch. One evening Father said to Mother, "What does he do there? I'll bet he's underfoot all day."

"Not at all. I can trust him with any job."

Actually, he was given a job. While the pigs were still very young they were kept in a large basket. Yura had appointed himself, with Mother's permission, naturally, and under her watchful eye, in charge of taking the pigs out of the basket one at a time and tucking them under Beluga's teats to suckle.

The young pigs were not growing uniformly. Some were bigger and some were smaller. After a while they began getting an extra feeding of cow's milk. This is the story Mother told us one evening:

"They called me over to the office at feeding time today. I left Yura in charge of things and told him to be sure that all the pigs were fed. I can't tell you what I found when I got back! Some of the pigs were at the feeder, sucking milk. The rest were locked up in the pen, with a stick holding the door fast. I looked into the pen and saw that all the bigger, stronger pigs were there. They were squealing like mad and pressing against the wire fence. They were starved. 'What have you done, Yura?

That's no way to treat little pigs!' I said. And he replied, 'Well, they're greedy. They kept pushing the little ones away and wanted to eat up everything themselves.' 'But they all have to eat, the bigger ones and the smaller ones, otherwise they'll stop growing.' I had a hard time convincing him. 'All right,' he finally agreed. 'I'll feed the greedy ones after the little ones eat. Then it'll be fair.'"

Yura's carried his love for animals into his adult life. Our parents still have a rascally mutt Tobik who resembles the famous Belka and Strelka, the two space dogs. Yura raised Tobik from a rheumy, wretched little waif and presented him to our parents during one of his trips back home to Gzhatsk. It was still Gzhatsk then.

Chapter 4

THE KITE AND THE GLIDER

The biting March winds and driving rain consumed the last of the snow, and the gurgling rivulets of snow-water disappeared in the ravines. Snowdrops appeared, unfolding their bright petals on the damp meadow that was still yellow from last year's grass. The hill which had been covered with the tracks of daring skiers once again became a long slope blanketed by soft green grass.

The days were long and sunny, especially Sundays. There was no school then and we would do our chores. There was quite a lot to be done, for Zoya and I were mainly responsible for the household, since Mother worked at the farm and Father was busy at his carpentry. Then, when all the chores were done, we would wander about aimlessly, not knowing what to do.

On a Sunday such as this Zoya decided to take Boris for a walk. "We're going to the woods. Who wants to go with us?" she said.

"It's still too damp," I objected.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to. You'll be sorry, though."

Yura and I remained.

Yura was leafing through some back issues of a Young Pioneer magazine, looking at the pictures and photographs and reading the captions aloud. We did not know when he had learned to read. He had always listened intently when Zoya and

I had done our homework, and one day we discovered that he knew the alphabet.

"Look, Valya. See how big his kite is!"

He handed me the magazine. There was a photograph of a boy in a white sun hat on the back cover. His arm was strained as he held on tightly to a string at the end of which was a huge five-pointed kite flying in the clouds. The kite was made of paper and slats. Everything seemed tiny by comparison: the telegraph pole, the two-storey house in the background and the boy who was surrounded by his friends. There was a drawing under the photograph with instructions on how to make the marvellous kite.

"Let's make one!" Yura said excitedly.

There were glue and as many slats as we could have wished for in the shed. Why not try it? The one drawback was the paper. We did not have the kind of heavy white paper the instructions called for. But we found a way out.

"Get some old newspapers, Yura."

We pasted several sheets together to make heavy sheets and soon had the shape we needed. We used six slats for a frame, two of which crossed from corner to corner. Mother had a sewing box that was out of bounds for Yura and Boris, as it had been for Zoya and me when we were little. Inside were rare treasures: spools of coloured thread, a locket with a missing lid, unstrung beads and old, imitation gold rings. We found some binding that would do very nicely for a string.

"We'll fly it from the hill."

Solemnly and proudly we carried our creation from the house. Volodya Orlovsky and Vanya Zernov, another one of Yura's friends, joined us. After a while a small group of children gathered on the hill to watch.

We were lucky. There was a sharp wind blowing that day. I wound the binding around my finger and said, "You hold on to the kite now, Yura, but as soon as I tell you to, toss it up and let go."

I raced down the hill as fast as I could. The wind whistled in my ears. "Leggo!" I yelled. Something yanked at my arm and, at the very same moment, a sharp pain shot through my heel. I gasped and fell, letting go of the binding. A green sliver of glass from a broken bottle was sticking out of my heel. It took some effort to pull it out. Then I limped back up the hill.

"Look! It's flying!" the children were shouting as they ran about.

"Hurray!"

"It's higher than the sky!"

"Look at the pigeons!"

I, too, spotted the flock of white birds flying high overhead. The wind was carrying our kite straight at them. From below it looked awfully small. However, they must have taken it for a monster, for they stopped in mid-air, did some sort of crazy dance, then turned and fled helter-skelter.

Another gust of wind turned the kite into a tiny sheet of paper. Soon it vanished from sight.

"Why'd you have to let go of the string?" Yura demanded.

"Never mind. Let's make another one."

By then Zoya and Boris had come back from their walk in the woods. There was a bunch of blue snowdrops in a glass jar on the window-sill which seemed to light up the room.

"There's still snow under the trees," Boris announced.

"But it's lovely all the same. It's too bad you didn't come along," Zoya said.

"We're not sorry at all, are we Valya?" Yura said and smiled mysteriously.

The other children were impatient to begin. This time our work proceeded at a faster pace, for we had gained some experience and had quite a few helpers.

The children flew the second kite themselves. I think it was carried away by the wind.

That was only the beginning! Every day Yura, Volodya and Vanya Zernov would be waiting for me after school. They needed another kite, and that was all there was to it. Some days I'd make two and even three kites. Finally, they got the knack of it themselves. Father was annoyed by this kite-craze, because he'd barely get a chance to see the paper before we'd whisk it away for the next kite.

After school was out that day the Young Pioneers and Komsomol members gathered in the assembly room to discuss how best to celebrate the coming May Day. We decided to put on a joint recital, to be followed by a programme of exhibition calisthenics and were on to who was going to take part in what.

While the usual heated discussion was under way, I kept glancing at the far corner. There, on top of a bookcase, was a model glider. It was dusty and full of holes, and one wing had been wrenched halfway off.

When our meeting was over I went up to the Pioneer leader and said, "Can I take that?"

"The glider? Sure. I've been wanting to throw it out anyway. It's just gathering dust there."

It was not a small glider, for the wingspread was over a meter, but it certainly was a wreck. I knew I would never be able to fix it. I had simply asked for it out of curiosity.

At the sight of it Yura gasped. "Golly! It's just like a real airplane!"

"It's not an airplane, it's a glider. It flies in the wind like a kite."

"If it has wings it means it's an airplane."

Father was not usually interested in our games and pastimes, but he also took an interest in the glider. I had set it on the floor. There it was, with one wing drooping sadly, the holes in the body full of cobwebs, and a bold little spider crawling out of a crevice in the tail. A sorry sight, indeed. Father walked around it, touched the crippled wing and said, "How could they have wrecked such a fine thing!" He seemed lost in thought. Then, quite unexpectedly, he said, "I think we can fix it. We'll try. We'll make a new wing and cover the body with tissue paper." At this he rapped on it. "It has to be drawn tight. To make it light and sturdy." He put on his cap and added, "You start planing the slats for the wing, Valya. But be sure to pick a pine board that's good and dry. It has to be very light. And don't be in a rush. Work that's done in a rush is wasted work. I'll go over to the store and get the tissue paper."

This was just like Dad. He had been a carpenter, a harness-maker and a brick-layer since childhood, good at anything he put his hand to, a man who had made the world richer by several dozen houses. He regarded anything that had been made by human hands with respect and taught us this respect, too.

It was a long way to the store. Father would not be back for at least an hour. I began planing the slats carefully. Yura was constantly underfoot. He'd hand me a chisel I didn't need or would suddenly pop up with a pair of pliers and set them on the workbench.

"Come on! Can't you hurry?" he pleaded. "You'll never get done this way!"

"Aren't you quick, though! Didn't you hear Dad say not to rush?"

This mention of Father's instructions cooled him off somewhat, but not for long. Soon he was getting in my way

again. This time he said, "If you don't know how to do it, you should have said so."

I was about to chase him away when Father returned. Together we repaired and set the wing in place. Then we covered the entire plane with new tissue paper.

"Let's draw stars on the wings," Yura said.

I swallowed the bait. "And we'll write our name on it in capital letters: GAGARIN. And...."

Father interrupted me coldly, "You will not! What if it won't fly? You want everyone to laugh at you? And who do you think you are, anyway? Ga-ga-rin!" he mocked, enunciating each syllable. "You're not Peter the Great yet!"

Of all of Russia's great men, Father was most impressed by Peter I. He had read every book on him in our village library. Father was a slow reader. He made an effort to understand the true meaning of each word, returning again and again to a difficult or interesting passage. This evening reading, which took up many winters, was indeed a feat.

On a par with his admiration for Peter the Great was his hatred of Catherine II. He referred to her scornfully as "German Kate".

"You're not Peter the Great yet...."

I was abashed and said no more.

"Come on. We don't have to draw anything on it. See, it's getting dark," Yura urged.

Although there was no hint of darkness yet, I shared his impatience.

We headed for the meadow beyond the village. Father stood watching from the yard, for though a glider was not a toy, still, it was a child's game and, therefore, it did not become him to accompany us.

Once again, as when we had flown the kite, a crowd of children gathered round.

Our first attempt was unsuccessful. The glider tilted at a height of ten or twelve metres and fell to the ground.

"Darn! We'll have to repair it again!" I muttered to myself, but was surprised to see that nothing had broken.

Our second, third and fourth attempts all ended in failure, too. The kids began to snicker.

"It's a tractor, not a glider."

"No, it isn't. A tractor makes noise and ploughs."

"This won't even give you any heat if you use it for firewood."

I was very uncomfortable. I glanced at Yura. His cheeks were flaming, his eyes were unnaturally bright, and his lips were compressed. He seemed to be even more upset than I was.

"That's all, kids," I said. "We'll pop it in the oven and use it for firewood. There must be something wrong in the design. Let's go home."

Yura blocked my way. "Just one last time, Valya! Please!"

What could we lose? I picked up the glider and ... this time it remained airborne. It soared straight up, assumed a horizontal position and sailed off, its grey, tissue-paper wings swaying. It was flying! Flying, heading for the farm building in which the uncrowned queen of the Klushino pig herd, the champion sow Beluga, dwelled.

The boys chased after it. I headed back home. Father was still in the yard, leaning on his cane. He greeted me with a mocking look.

"Well, it did fly!" I exclaimed, unable to conceal my exultation.

The glider eclipsed our kites completely, and until the boys finally wrecked it they lost interest in everything else.

Many years later, after Yura had orbited into space, he visited me in the city of Ryazan. We sat at the table, talking about various things. I was most interested in his recent flight, but he kept leading the conversation back to our childhood in Klushino.

"Do you remember our glider?" he asked with a smile.

"Certainly. That was just before the war."

"I often think of it. I even remember the poem." Yura looked off into the distance and recited with obvious pleasure:

Like Vodopyanov I shall be
When I can fly my country's planes.
I'll see our planet underneath,
As I soar down the sky's blue lanes.

We spoke of other things and did not mention the glider again. However, I cannot but wonder whether his great passion for flying was not born in those far-off days, when he was so completely taken up with our kites and glider.

Chapter 5

THE STORY OF COMMISSAR SUSHKIN

There was a rise surrounded by a wrought-iron fence at the spot where all the village streets converged. Here stood a modest monument to Comrade Sushkin, a revolutionary hero and commissar during the Civil War.

The office of our collective farm, which had been named after the commissar, was located nearby, as were the village Soviet, community centre, general store and our one-storey wooden schoolhouse.

Just before May Day a team of local carpenters under my father put up a wooden speakers' platform next to the monument.

A freckled girl, the office messenger, came running to the farm. "The chairman said you're to come to the meeting," she said to my mother.

"All right, as soon as I feed the pigs and go home to change."

"But the chairman said you're to come as you are. There's such a crowd!"

"All right. I'll be right over."

Mother had to pass our house to get to the meeting. She might have come in to change, but since the chairman had said to hurry she did not stop off.

The meeting was in progress when she came hurrying into the square. The chairman, Kuleshov, and representative from the district centre were both standing on the platform that was draped in bunting. The representative, a short, black-haired man of about thirty-five, was dressed in a leather jacket and blue riding breeches. He was speaking.

The entire village had come to the meeting. We schoolchildren were lined up beside our banner and stared at the district representative over the caps, red kerchiefs and straw hats of our fellow villagers. Yura and Volodya Orlovsky were somewhere up front, as usual.

"Comrades," the representative said, slicing the air with his hand, "we are celebrating this May Day at a time of general enthusiasm.... There are some who would like to start a war scare.... But, comrades...."

The orator spoke very well. Everyone listened intently, and when someone coughed he was shushed from all sides.

Then he mopped his brow and smiled contentedly. When the applause finally died down, for our people were generous and clapped long and hard, he gave the floor to the collective-farm chairman.

"Well, being as the comrade from the district centre has explained things correctly, I won't repeat his words. You hear me every day as it is. I have an announcement to make. The Board has decided to award a bonus to our best workers. We'll give out the presents now."

There was a loud murmur of approval. Someone in the back rows began to clap and everyone joined in.

"Now then," the chairman said in a voice loud enough to be heard above the noise of the crowd. "We'll start alphabetically. Anna Belova!"

Aunt Annie, the mother of our friends, the Belov brothers, hung back.

"Go on," her husband said and nudged her.

The small, thin woman blushed deeply and, quite confused by having so many eyes on her, advanced uncertainly towards the platform. "I'm not used to this sort of thing," she said in some embarrassment.

There were several bundles, wrapped in newspaper on two stools.

"Now, as you're one of our best milkers, you get a length of cloth for a skirt," Kuleshov said and unwrapped the bundle, holding the cloth up for the villagers to see. There was some more applause. Aunt Annie shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her hands were clasped tightly behind her.

"Do take it, Comrade," the representative said encouragingly.

"Thank you kindly," she mumbled and made her way quickly into the crowd.

"Anna Gagarina!"

This was when Mother regretted not having stopped by at home to change. But she had no choice now and came forward in her blue smock.

"There's cloth for a skirt here, too," the chairman said as he handed her gift and shook her hand. The representative bent close to his ear and whispered.

"The comrade from the district centre wondered if you would care to say a few words," the chairman said, detaining Mother. "You're not shy, are you? Tell the people how you

overfulfil your daily quota and the way you bring up your four children. And about how you work."

Mother shrugged, then smiled. "No, I'm not shy," she said, "but I think you've said all there is to say already." Then she became serious. "I work on the collective farm like all our people do, and get real pleasure from my work. I wouldn't mind working like this for the rest of my life. And I want to thank him, Comrade Sushkin...." here she turned to the monument, "and others like him for everything."

Another murmur of approval went up. Mother was making her way towards the back of the crowd. She was obviously flustered.

After the meeting ended the school amateur performers' group put on a recital. We sang and recited lustily. Then the square became deserted. Mother was standing off to a side, waiting for Zoya and me. She held Yura by the hand.

"Did you like our performance?" Zoya, who was quite flushed from excitement, asked.

"Yes. Very much," Mother said and fixed Zoya's red tie. Then she added softly,"I found myself taking the stage today, too. I never expected that."

"Let's go to look at Sushkin, Mamma," Yura said and tugged at her hand. "I've never seen him real close."

"All right."

A photograph protected by a square of glass was affixed to the obelisk. The man on the photograph had a thin moustache and gentle, thoughtful eyes, the eyes of a dreamer, like those of Uncle Pavel. He also had the high brow of a thinker. This was the face of a very kind person.

"Was he young when he died, Ma?" Yura asked.

"He was murdered, son."

"Who murdered him?"

"The kulaks. The enemies of Soviet power. And after they murdered him, they mutilated his body."

"Were the kulaks on the tsar's side?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"Yes, tell us about it, Mother," Zoya and I said.

"This is how it happened...."

This is how it happened.

A kulak uprising broke out in Gzhatsk District in 1922. The rich kulaks and those few among the middle and poor peasants

whom they had duped banded together in armed groups. Whiteguard officers who had been hiding from the Soviet authorities headed these units.

The kulak uprising in Gzhatsk was not the only one of its kind at the time. The kulaks were raising their heads in other regions of Central Russia. They were also binding the counter-revolutionary forces together in the Volga region and in far-off Siberia, where the Civil War had not yet ended. The enemies of the young Soviet Republic were intent on destroying it from within. As a rule, kulak uprisings always began in the same way, with a massacre of those who were devoted to Soviet power. Many Communists and Komsomol members from Gzhatsk and the surrounding villages were murdered during that time.

An armoured train carrying a unit of Red Lettish riflemen arrived from Petrograd to aid the Communists of Gzhatsk and the small Red Army garrison. The mutiny was finally put down, but the kulaks of Klushino still held out. They fought back the first attack of the Lettish riflemen. Then the guns of the armoured train shelled their trenches.

It was at this moment that a kulak escort took Commissar Sushkin, captured during the first day of the uprising, out to be shot.

He was led past his cottage. His small son ran up to him. "Go back, son. I don't want you to get hurt. Go back, hear me? Those are our guns. The kulaks won't last long. Run back into the house to Mamma," Sushkin said.

A shell fired from the train exploded nearby, sending up a fountain of earth which came down on the guards and their prisoner. The frightened guards scattered. As one of them scampered by, he managed to shoot the commissar in the back.

Sushkin toppled face-down into the dust of the road. His son bent over him and untied his hands.

The next morning the Red Lettish riflemen took the village. Our Uncle Seryozha, a worker from Petrograd and Mother's elder brother, led them. He had been a Communist since the age of sixteen. He was a commissar in the Red Army and a close friend of the murdered Sushkin. Uncle Seryozha had brought the armoured train from Petrograd to help put down the kulak uprising and was broken-hearted when he learned of Sushkin's death.

"How come I never saw Uncle Seryozha?" Yura asked.

"He died of typhus that same year, son."

"If I ever got my hands on those kulaks, I'd have shown them!"

Mother glanced at Yura. Though the memory of her brother had brought on sad thoughts, she could not help smiling at the anger and courage in Yura's eyes.

As we walked home down the hill Yura kept looking back at the monument I also turned to look at the simple wooden obelisk.

From that day on Yura and Volodya Orlovsky had a new game. They made themselves some wooden swords and spent all their time in the meadow playing "Commissar Sushkin and Uncle Seryozha". Sometimes they would let Boris join the game, but he always had to be a kulak or the armoured train.

Chapter 6

A NIGHT AT THE MILL

We lay on a sheet of coarse linen sacking with a wide sheepskin coat and two old blankets for covers. Uncle Pavel lay in the middle, with Yura on his right and I on his left. Last year's hay under us rustled loudly at each movement; the thatched roof above had a hole where a recent hurricane wind had wrenched out some of the straw. A solitary blue star winked coldly through the opening. Though it cast a sombre light, the sour, homey smell of the sheepskin which not even the strong smell of the hay could kill made us feel snug and cozy.

"No matter how far a Russian may wander, he'll never forget his home, boys," Uncle Pavel was saying.

Uncle Pavel's grown daughter had been living in Moscow for many years, and now that his wife had died he found his loneliness unbearable. Often, at twilight, he would knock at our door and say to Mother, "Let the boys sleep in the hayloft with me, Anna."

Mother always consented. Yura and I would snatch up the sacking, the sheepskin and a blanket. We'd make up our bed while Father and Uncle Pavel sat on the porch, smoking a last cigarette before retiring. One would think they were twins, the only difference being that Uncle Pavel was taller than Father.

So it was this evening. Uncle Pavel finished his cigarette and climbed up to the hayloft. Now, as always on such evenings,

our journey over land and sea would commence. Indeed, there wasn't a spot on earth to which our all-knowing uncle had not taken us! We had hunted mustangs in the prairies of America, climbed the highest mountain peaks, discovered, independently of Columbus and Magellan, new lands, accompanied Afanasy Nikitin, a 16th century Russian merchant, on his journey to India, flew over the North Pole with Chkalov and spent a winter on an Arctic ice-floe with Papanin. Our kindly, knowledgeable uncle was Fenimore Cooper, Victor Hugo and Jules Verne rolled into one, as well as a commentator on all the latest national events of importance such as the progress of Soviet explorers in the Arctic, Siberia and the Far East. But we learned something else besides the wonders of the world. Uncle Pavel taught us how to dream.

When he began to speak we would forget all about time. The music of the accordion would die down outside the community centre, the girls would stop singing and the village would drift off to sleep, yet Uncle Pavel would speak on and on, as we listened raptly, forgetting slumber. It seemed that nothing existed on earth save ourselves and our common dream.

"So you see, boys, no matter how far a Russian may be from home, he will never forget the smell of hay, the smell of his native soil," Uncle Pavel said.

We expected a really gripping story to follow this introduction and pricked up our ears, but he unexpectedly fell silent for a long time.

"Once, when I was sitting under a haystack, a lizard crawled under my shirt," Yura recalled for no good reason.

"Did it scare you?"

"At first it did, but then I got hold of its tail and got it out my shirt. Only its tail fell off. Did that hurt a lot?"

"It grew a new tail," I said. "Are you sleeping, Uncle?"

"No."

"Then why don't you say something?"

"I got to looking at that star and thinking."

There was something I, too, had been thinking about off and on. I had not found the answer in any books or in my talks with my friends. "Is there life on any of the stars? Maybe just on one?" I asked.

"Well, Valya," my uncle replied, sitting up and in doing so pulling the blanket off me so that the cold gripped my bare feet, "you seem to have guessed my thoughts. That's just what I've been thinking about."

"Are there any people on the stars?" Yura asked.

"Well; my boy, we must first see what the difference is between a star and a planet. Every star is like a sun. The temperature on it is so high that no living thing could live there. Even things like steel or diamonds would turn into steam and evaporate in a flash. That's how hot it is there. Now as to the planets, it seems to me that there are some that are like our Earth. And somebody must live there."

"Which ones are like the Earth? Mars, Jupiter, Venus or Pluto? Science knows all about them."

"Then you know very little about science, my boy," Uncle chided. "Those are the planets of our solar system, but the scientists can't even agree about half of them. There's no end to the number of suns in the Universe. And there are other planets revolving around each of those suns. Planets we can't see."

He suddenly rolled off the loft. We could hear him pulling on his boots below.

"Tell you what, boys. Since it looks as if we're not going to sleep anyway, come on down and we'll go for a walk."

There was no need to coax us.

Our native village looked strange at night. There was something unfamiliar and alien about it. In the daytime, when the sun is shining, a cottage is as it should be, with a front garden full of lilacs. But at night the cottages are forbidding, massive, shaggy haystacks that seem to be crowding onto the road.

Yura and I held hands as we followed our uncle. One after another the stars came out. Our cold blue star became insignificant and was soon lost among the others. Then the thin sliver of a new moon appeared and hung suspended over the village.

We crossed the road and headed into the meadow. The dew-heavy grass bent soundlessly underfoot, covering us with cold drops.

"Heavy dew means no rain," Uncle Pavel said.

The cowshed was now to the left of us. We could hear the cows munching loudly. The warm, even glow of a lantern seeped through the party-covered window of the watchman's room. Andrei Kalugin, the old watchman, the heaviest smoker in the village and always one for a good story or joke, was still up. I felt relieved to see that someone else besides us was still awake.

We soon passed the cowshed, but kept on, with only Uncle Pavel knowing our destination.

"There's the forest," I said.

"We're not going to the forest."

"Where are we going?"

He did not reply. All I could see was his back. Now and then a branch would crack under his foot. This strange midnight venture took on an eerie charm.

Suddenly the dark hulking mass of the windmill loomed ahead. The mill was sleeping its troubled, old-man's sleep, creaking, sighing, wheezing.

"Here we are," Uncle Pavel said as he pushed at the heavy gates that parted with a squeak. We were overcome by the smell of flour, of the mill-stones that had become overheated during the day and were now cooling slowly, and of pine sap.

"Why'd we come to the mill?" I wanted to ask, but before I could open my mouth there was a loud, frightening peal of laughter. I started.

"Help!" Yura cried and pressed close to me.

"It's only an owl," Uncle Pavel said evenly. "It's trying to scare us, but we don't scare easily."

It was dark inside the mill, with only a faint, flickering beam of light coming in through the small, high window. I felt as if we were standing on the bottom of a deep, dried-up well.

"Let's go!" Uncle Pavel said.

The stairs creaked under us.

"Come on, Yura!"

Pressing close together, we felt cautiously for each step, climbing higher and higher. The staircase moaned and swayed as visions of ghosts, witches and devils loomed large. The people of our forest region had but slowly cast off the old superstitions. In the daytime, with the sun shining brightly, I would usually laugh at the kids' tales of witches and devils. But now, in the dead of night at the old mill, every ghost story I had ever heard came back to me. The owl hooted and cackled again. This time the sounds came from another direction. If not for Uncle Pavel in front of me and Yura hanging onto my hand, I would have been out of there and gone in a flash.

Uncle Pavel stopped at the small dormer window under the eaves. "Where are you?" he called and then gave us a hand up.

A chill wind was blowing in through the window.

"Throw back your heads and look at the sky," Uncle Pavel said.

We moved closer and did as we were told. I think Yura was the first to guess why our uncle had brought us there.

"Look how big the stars are. As big as your fist."

"Yes, Yura. See the Milky Way? Can you see it, Valya?"

"Yes. So what?"

I was surprised by the young ring that had suddenly appeared in my uncle's voice.

"Well, boys, that's where all the other worlds are. There are many suns there, and many planets, and each one follows its own course. There are even planets like ours among them."

"Maybe somebody's looking down at us right now," Yura said.

"Certainly they are." Uncle Pavel replied excitedly. "They're dying to know how things are down here on Earth and whether there are any people on it, after all."

I was chilled to the bone, having nothing on save my trousers and a cotton shirt. Yura was worse off, for he was wearing shorts.

"Oh, Uncle Pavel," I chided. "We could have seen the Milky Way just as well from the hayloft. What did we have to drag all the way out here for?"

"You're a funny boy," he replied after a while. The ring had gone from his voice. "We would have looked at it, talked a bit and forgotten all about it. But now it will stay in your mind forever."

Yura jerked his hand from mine.

"What's the matter?" I said. He did not reply, but I understood. He was hurt because I had offended Uncle Pavel. I felt ashamed for having been so blunt, but could not think of a way to make amends.

Fortunately, Uncle Pavel was not one to hold a grudge. He hugged us and we stood for a long while with his arms around our shoulders, gazing up through the window at the blue sky and the stars.

As the saying goes, June nights are no longer than a sparrow's bill.

Soon the stardust became paler. It was dissolving like thin ice in a spring torrent until there were only a few tiny stars left. The horizon in the east became pink.

A shepherd played his horn at the far end of the village. The sound of his song floated overhead and was lost in the dense, blue-black woods.

"Time to go home," Uncle Pavel said with a sigh.

We climbed down the steep, rickety stairs, no longer frightened by the creaking. All our recent fears seemed silly now.

Mother was leading our cow out to the herd. She was taken aback when she saw us. "Where have you been, you sleepwalkers? Well, well, wait till Father hears about this," she said jokingly.

"Shhh! Not a word," Uncle Pavel said. He tiptoed towards the hayloft like a conspirator, with us in his wake. Five minutes later we were sound asleep.

Later in the week I went alone to the mill to look at the stars again. I do not know whether it was because Uncle Pavel and my brother were not there, or because I knew where I was going and why I had come, but I did not again experience that first excitement of discovery, the feeling that I was somehow linked to the mysteries of the Universe, a feeling which had filled my soul that first night.

I was disappointed when I left. The stars were rather small, and I felt calm and unmoved.

I know that Yura went there several times at night, too, both by himself (I can imagine how frightening the trek had been) and with the boys. Unlike myself, he seemed to have made friends with the old windmill.

Chapter 7

WAR

At noon on a Saturday a band of Gypsies descended upon Klushino from out of the blue. Their long wagons drawn by pairs of horses rumbled through the village streets, turned into the meadow and stopped not far from our cottage.

I had just returned from mowing, for in the summer time all the schoolchildren worked on the collective farm. Yura had been fishing. The two of us were sitting on the small porch, waiting for our parents. Zoya was inside, cooking fish soup, for Yura had brought home a good catch.

It was an unusually hot day. The sun beat down unmercifully. We sought what shade there was under the porch roof.

In no time the Gypsies had unharnessed their horses. Soon three tattered calico tents mushroomed on the meadow.

A group of about fifteen darkly-tanned, curly-haired men and long-nosed women carrying infants was moving away from the camp.

"They're comming here," Yura said.

Indeed, they were soon outside our gate. A grey-bearded man with a wrinkled face walked up to the porch, raised his straw hat politely and spoke in a gutteral voice: "How do you do, young men. May we drink from your well?"

"There's a pail on the chain, and there's plenty of water."

Yura was immediately on his feet. In another moment he had come out of the house carrying a large tin cup. "Drink all you want," he said, handing the old man the cup.

"Thank you, young man."

We were fascinated as we watched the Gypsies drink. First, the old man drank slowly and with great dignity. Then the elder men drank, and then the younger men. After all the men had had their fill, the cup was handed over to the women.

The Gypsies praised the cold, delicious water. Then they went into the village, leaving the cup on the edge of the well.

A moment later Father returned. He was hot from the scorching sun and from walking in the heat and slowed down by the well. He scooped up a cupful of water from the pail and lifted the cup to his lips.

"Gypsies were drinking from it just now," Yura said.

"Every human's a person," Father said simply, having drunk. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Go hurry Zoya, Yura. Tell her to set the table quickly. There's still a lot to do today. Is Mother home yet?"

Mow, scythes, before the dew dries! It was an old saying.

The muscles of my arms, especially the right one, were bunched and aching from strain. We had come to the meadows at dawn. Now the sun was practically overhead, making our shadows seem short and chunky. The dew had long since dried, but we kept on swinging our scythes, hurrying to reach the end of the long row. We boys followed the men, the farm's experienced mowers, and it seemed they did not know the meaning of fatigue.

Sweat trickled into our eyes. My sunburned shoulders ached. Mother had wanted to put some goose fat on them in the morning, but I had protested. I should have let her do it.

Finally, our team-leader, a tall, sinewy, tireless old man, shouted: "Time out!"

The men and youths fell onto the grass. A tobacco pouch was passed around. I was dying to light up like the men were doing, rolling their cigarettes slowly, inhaling the bitter home-grown tobacco with relish. The temptation was great, indeed, but if Father found out he'd have no mercy for me. So I lay there on my back, squinting up at the sun, thinking that this was the longest day in the year, the middle of the summer and, perhaps, also the hottest day. I thought about haymaking time in the village, when everyone forgot to count the days. Take today, for instance. It was a Sunday, but everyone was working.

"If the weather holds out like this for another five days we should be done with the hay," the team-leader was saying. "The cattle'll have a good winter. See how high the grass is."

What were five more days? We had been mowing for more than that. It had been tortuous toil at first, but I'd finally got the knack of it.

"Anyone who's close to home can go home for lunch," the team-leader said.

It was only a stone's throw to our house, and we had a long break, so I left my scythe on the grass and ran home. True, I wasn't very hungry, but a cool mug of milk from the cellar would be perfect.

I had to cross the clearing on which the Gypsies had made their camp the day before. They had left in the night, unnoticed. Now only a burned circle where there had been a campfire, some rags, paper and the grass their horses had trampled remained.

When the night has passed, at dawning,
Off I'll go, my dearest one.
Off I'll go, with Gypsies wandering,
In a Gypsy caravan.

I sang as best as I could and felt that my lips were cracked from the heat and from thirst. I thought about how nice it would be to join a Gypsy caravan and wander over the wide world. How many cities and towns they must see, how many interesting people they must meet, and all of these people were different and each had their own way of life. I could travel along with the Gypsies in the summer and return home in autumn. Then it would be I who told Uncle Pavel and not he who told me all those strange and wonderful tales.

Everyone but Father was at home.

Yura and Boris were sitting on the floor. Yura held an open book.

"Repeat after me," he was saying to Boris.

"To Klim Voroshilov
A letter I did write...."

Boris was obviously not much of a student. He kept turning his head every which way and stealing glances at the window. An orange butterfly was moving cautiously along the pane outside.

"Come on, repeat what I say," Yura sounded annoyed. "If you don't you'll have to do exercises."

Mother and Zoya were busy wielding scissors and tape, making two pairs of shorts for the boys from Mother's old skirt.

"Whew, I'm tired," I said as I sank down on the bench by the door.

Zoya, who had a sharp tongue, was quick to reply, "Don't brag so. We're going to the meadow after lunch, too. We'll be turning the hay."

"Turning it isn't the same as mowing."

We heard steps outside. It was Father. Why was he in such a hurry? The door burst open. Father stood on the threshold. He did not stop to catch his breath, but rasped: "We're at war!"

No one said a word.

In this sudden and unusual quiet, for in a house with many children it is never quiet, I realised that Mother was weeping. She sat there on a stool, weeping softly and wiping her tears on a corner of her kerchief.

I remember clearly the way Yura and Boris rose slowly and tiptoed over to her to press against her from both sides. She embraced them and held them close.

"Boy, will those nazis ever get a beating! The Red Army will show them!" I said with something akin to joyful excitement, ashamed because Mother was crying. But my voice sounded hollow and my words did not comfort anyone.

"There's heavy fighting going on," Father said. "The Germans have bombed a lot of our cities and towns, and they've crossed the border. Molotov just spoke over the radio." He paused, then went over to the table, sat down on a stool and leaned his head on his hands, saying, "I don't feel well. My head's splitting. And I've got a chill."

Zoya made a dash for the thermometer. "Take your temperature," she said.

Father waved her away feebly. "It'll pass. I'll sit here for a few minutes and it'll pass. I must have got overheated."

"Didn't I say you're going to take your temperature?" Zoya repeated sternly. She was a persistent girl.

"Look, you've got a raging fever."

But Father did not hear her. He seemed to be dozing, or perhaps he had blacked out.

Mother rose and ushered Yura and Boris out. "Go and play outside, boys. And don't come into the house until I call you. And don't go near your father."

The door closed behind them. Mother's eyes were dry now. Her usual gentle manner and soft movements had been replaced by an unfamiliar decisiveness. "It's typhus," she said. "Our whole family had it in 'twenty-two. Go to the chairman and ask him for a horse and wagon, Valya. We'll take Father to Gzhatsk."

The journey to Gzhatsk was a long and dreary one. Mother and I accompanied Father. The calamities which had descended upon us simultaneously, news of the war and Father's illness, did not break us, but somehow crushed and exhausted us more than any work could ever have done.

"What are we in for?" Mother would repeat every so often. "No matter what, our forces are stronger than theirs and we'll soon beat the nazis," I'd say, trying to comfort her.

"Oh, son, who knows what will have happened by then. You don't know what war is. But I remember the First World War, and the Civil War. Even though I was still a child, I had my share of grief and sorrow."

Father moaned and thrashed about. He begged for water, he was hot and cold in turn and kept losing consciousness. At long last we reached the hospital.

Father was put in an infectious diseases ward. It was on the first floor and I went to look in the window to see where he was. I pressed my face against the pane. There, lying on the bed closest to the window, was the polite old Gypsy in the straw hat who had spoken to us the day before. His face was turned towards the window. His bleary eyes stared at me but did not recognise me. Perhaps he didn't even see me.

In a flash I recalled the tin cup standing on the edge of the well and Father scooping up a cupful of water from the pail and drinking thirstily.

Chapter 8

THE REFUGEES

The war had begun but a short while before and yet the endless stream of refugees from the Western border regions continued day and night on the road past our house.

Never before had we seen so many people. There were old men and women, young women and infants, and boys and girls, though women and children made up the majority. Their faces were black from dust and exhaustion. Many of the grown-ups and children, too, carried small, limp sacks slung over a shoulder. There were just a few belongings in their sacks, some necessary, some not, things they had grabbed as they had fled from their bombed homes. The refugees would stop by the village houses and offer to trade their belongings for food. But the collective-farm women would bring out bread, milk and eggs, refusing to take any payment. Once in a while a cart would appear in the human stream. A bony horse would be barely dragging it along. Clutching at the reins was a lucky driver who did not have to trudge along on foot, with a cartful of hungry children behind.

A young girl in a white kerchief and a lavender dress was riding a man's bicycle. A large wicker laundry basket was tied to the baggage rack. It was hard for her to keep her balance when everyone was moving so slowly, and so she jumped down and wheeled it. The bicycle was large and heavy and the back wheel, weighted down by the load, kept wobbling.

An old man with a mane of long grey hair was pushing a handcart with high iron wheels. There was a sack in the cart and sitting on it was a small boy in a sailor suit. There were anchors on his jacket and the word "Krasin" in silver letters on the ribbon of his sailor's cap. The old man's eyes were red from lack of sleep. His lips were compressed. The boy kept looking around suspiciously. You could see they were a grandfather and his grandson.

Two old nuns went by in their black robes and kerchiefs pulled down over their very eyes.

A ragged column of closely-cropped boys and girls of ten to twelve, orphans from a children's home, followed. A middle-aged woman teacher and a man with a moustache and wearing an army shirt with an empty sleeve trudged along at the head of the column. The man would look back from time to time and shout in a hoarse voice: "Tighten your ranks!" and the

children would obediently walk faster, catch up with those ahead and then fall behind again.

It was impossible to get to our well. Some of the refugees would stop for a short rest in the shade of the apple trees, sitting or reclining as they chewed on a stale chunk of bread; others would stop by just to quench their thirst. By the end of the day there would be no water left in the well. And when the pail was pulled up there'd be a layer of clay as thick as your finger on the bottom.

If Mother were at home she'd run out with jugs of milk, saying, "At least give the children something, good people. Where are you from?"

"From Grodno," some would say.

"We're used to live in Minsk, dear."

"We're from Brest. You must have heard of it. It's on the Polish border."

The human stream flowed on and on, the people exhausted and hungry. The refugees did not weep. None of them did. Only the smallest children, unable to bear the heat, thirst and hunger any longer, would cry. There was sorrow on the faces of the adults and anger when they told us of the fascist bombs falling on their cities and towns, of the shells that splintered their homes, of the German motorcycle troops that overtook them on the roads and shot them down point-blank.

"Those fascists are not human," the women said. "No, they are not human."

The road knew no rest, day or night. These homeless, wretched people were carrying their grief, sorrow and hatred for the enemy deep into the heart of Russia.

Mother was the first to spot them through the window. "Yura, dear, see that lady with the children? Call them into the house."

A thin blonde woman had stopped by the well. Two small boys about the ages of Yura and Boris were hanging on to her skirts. A girl of about two or three was fast asleep, clung in a shawl on her back that was crossed and tied in front. The woman was trying to drink from the pail, but could not. On the one hand, the boys hanging on to her were in the way, and the child on her back would not let her bend over.

They entered the house timidly. Yura led them, holding the elder boy by the hand.

"How do you do," the woman said softly. "Your boy called us in."

"Come, sit down. Untie the shawl and put the baby on the bed. Tell the boys to come and sit at the table."

Mother bustled about, sending Zoya down to the celler for milk and salt pork, pulling a pot of cabbage soup from the oven and slicing thick chunks of bread.

The two boys were thin and awkward. They had not uttered a word since they had entered and had not left each other's side for a moment. They sat down side by side at the table and picked up their spoons listlessly.

"Come, eat my dears," Mother coaxed. "You don't look too full to eat."

"They're exhausted," their mother said. "We've come all the way from Lithuania, and every bit on foot. Nazi planes kept machine-gunning the roads."

"Do eat," Mother pleaded with the boys. "And don't you feel shy," she said to the woman. "Go on, take some bread."

Yura had been standing by the oven, watching the boys. All of a sudden he went over to the table, picked up a spoon and said, "I'll help them." He scooped up a spoonful of soup, bit off a chunk of bread and said in a serious tone of voice with his mouth full, "This is how you're supposed to eat!"

The boys watched him and began eating too.

Mother sat on a bench by the door, leaning her cheek on her hand, gazing at the woman and the children sadly. Then she said, "You stay the night here with us and rest up. Then you can start off again tomorrow."

The boys were through eating by then. They rose and said "Thank you" in unison. Yura and Boris took them off into the orchard. We remained indoors, listening to the woman's tale of their journey.

"It must have been close to 4 o'clock in the morning when bombs fell on our small town. I dashed out of the house and grabbed the boys. And we've been on the road ever since. Our people are very kind, they understand another's sorrow. Otherwise what would I have done, how could I have fed them?"

Mother shook her head. There was distress in her voice as she said, "I can see you have no belongings at all. And where's your husband?"

"He's an Army man. He left on assignment for the border region right before the war broke out."

"Things will be very hard on you. You're still so young and have three small children on your hands."

"The girl isn't mine. She's my neighbours' child. They were both killed, and she was left all alone."

"Oh, how terrible this all is! Indeed, she's the only dark-haired one among you. Just think, we had no idea that war had broken out when so much blood had already been shed. You know what? Stay on in our village. You can live in our house. There's room enough for everyone."

The woman hesitated, then shook head. "That's very kind of you, but they'll be here, too."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. It's frightening. My parents live in Tambov. We're going there."

Just then Yura came running into the house. He sounded very displeased when he told Mother that his new friends didn't want to play war.

"Don't play war, son! Think some other game." The woman's voice sounded very sad.

Mother became angry. "Just you wait with those war games! My, aren't you a brave hero."

Yura was stunned. He was not used to seeing his mother angry. He was out of the house in a flash, shouting, "All right. We'll play hide-and-seek."

At night, when our unexpected guests were sound asleep, Mother and Zoya cut and sewed a dress for the little girl, for she had nothing on save a boy's shirt.

When the woman took leave of us the next morning, Mother was already at work on the farm. "Perhaps we'll meet some day," she said in parting.

Zoya, Yura, Boris and I took them out to the road and stood gazing at their departing figures for a long time. The woman looked back several times. The boys did, too. Each time we'd raise our hands and wave and they would wave back.

Suddenly Yura dashed back into the house and soon came out carrying a loaf of bread and a large chunk of salt pork. "We didn't give them anything to take along," he shouted. "I'll catch up with them." He was off, raising a cloud of dust.

That evening, recalling a recent and, unfortunately, very distant conversation, which had taken place "before the war", Yura said, "Valya, is war like this? You said soldiers shoot at each other from cannons and guns."

"I guess it's like this, too, Yura."

He was nine years younger than I. What could I say to him? By village standards, and in his eyes, too, I was a grown person, but I did not have any idea of what a real war was like.

The woman's visit left a troubled feeling in our hearts. If previously I, and not I alone, had thought and believed that the Germans would be quickly stopped and turned back, then chased beyond our borders, a speck of doubt now crept into our souls. And fear. What if they really did reach our village? And what if we would have to take to the road, journeying we knew not where?

There was a marked change in Yura. Hardly a trace remained of his former mischievous, playful self. He smiled more rarely, he became thoughtful and silent and would spend his days by the porch or the well, carrying out bread, boiled potatoes, sugar, milk and cucumbers to the refugees.

He saw the tired, hungry children in the crowd and would often invite them into the house.

"Yura's getting older," Mother said and it did her heart good to see him growing up kind and considerate of others.

I do not know how many refugees crossed our threshold in those days.

Not once afterwards, neither during the war nor later, did we ever hear of the woman with the three children again. Was fate kind to them? Were they ever able to reach Tambov?

Or, and the thought is frightening, was the journey to be their last?

I often think of them....

Chapter 9

HERDS ON THE ROAD

I recall that August of 1941 was a time of commotion and confusion.

For about two weeks I worked on digging trenches with the other village boys who, like I, were too young for the army. Our tools were spades and picks. My back ached from fatigue while the callouses on my hands became hard, as the anti-tank ditches grew deeper and broader. However, the advance of the nazi troops continued. There were rumours that Minsk had fallen and that the Germans were about to enter Smolensk. We were soon disbanded and sent home.

There was more than enough work to be done in the village. During the very first days of war Kuleshov, our chairman, had been called up, as had the tractor drivers, the combine-harvester operators and the drivers, and they left taking the

farm's trucks and tractors. Everything was needed for the war effort. Now the women, old men and invalids remained to keep the collective farm going. Boys and girls of fifteen and sixteen became full-fledged workers.

As luck would have it, there was a bumper crop that year. The heavy ears of grain pressed the stalks to the ground. The wheat was overripe. All of us, young and old, went into the fields to harvest it. We worked till we were ready to drop, mowing by hand and threshing with flails as our grandfathers had done.

The road by our house knew no respite. As before, the stream of refugees continued, only now they were not from the border districts but from districts that were much closer to us.

Soon soldiers from retreating Red Army units appeared on the road.

Uncle Pavel came over one evening. "What are your plans for the future?" he asked Mother.

"I don't know what you mean." There was concern in her voice.

"You see, we're getting the herds together from all the local collective farms. I think we'll be taking them deep into the country, as far as Mordovia probably. I'm to be in charge of them."

"Then you'll be leaving?"

"It's an order. That's why I've come. We have to think this over. If the herds are being moved it means the Germans might reach here. The people on top know what they're doing. After all, it costs a lot to move so many animals. They wouldn't do it if there was no reason to. That's strategy. What I want to know is: what about you and the children?"

We sat there as still as mice, listening to every word. Uncle Pavel's face had become drawn and pale of late. His voice had a hollow ring and nothing, not a trace, remained of the man who had got us up in the dead of night to go to the mill and gaze at the stars and dream of distant worlds. War, in the full sense of the word, had not yet reached our village. Its distant thunder could only be heard as yet, but people were changing before our very eyes. Their former sense of well-being, their unhurried pace and complacency at times were gone. Each person's nerves were as taut as a bowstring.

"What's eva-cu-a-ted, Valya?" Yura asked in a whisper.

"That's so's the Germans don't get anything. They're taking the herd far, far away."

"When?"

"Soon. Tomorrow, maybe."

"Oh, I have to go out then."

"What for?"

"To say goodbye to Beluga and her babies." He slipped out quietly.

"Well, Anna? What have you decided? Will you come along? I can appoint you a drover. That won't be any problem," Uncle Pavel was saying.

"But how can I leave when Father's in the hospital? I went to see him yesterday. He's doing very poorly. He can't seem to get well. How can I leave him here alone? And then, I keep hoping that the villains won't get this far."

"It's up to you." He stood hesitating by the door and finally cleared his throat. "Well, since you're going to stay on, and since it won't make any difference to you, would you keep an eye on my house?" He sounded embarrassed. "After all, we're kin and neighbours. I'll be by tomorrow to say goodbye." He opened the door. The cool of evening wafted in from the passage. "I'll be going," he said, looking back. At that very moment someone knocked the wind out of him. "Yura, what's the matter?"

Yura stood in the doorway. His pale face was twisted, his eyes red from crying, his lips were trembling and his hands were balled up into fists.

"What's the matter, son? Did anyone hurt you?" Mother said anxiously as she rushed up to him.

"Ov-ov-over th-there," he stuttered, the words sticking in his throat. "Th-they're k-k-killing Be-beluga and her p-p-pigs...."

"Don't be silly," Uncle Pavel said and left.

"Who's killing them?" Mother demanded and rushed out in her housedress. Yura and I were right behind her.

Andrei Kalugin, the village watchman, stood outside the pigsty. A middle-aged Red Army soldier with a medal for bravery on his chest stood beside him. Kalugin was pouring home-grown tobacco from a large pouch into the soldier's cupped hand.

A pig squealed in terror inside the shed.

"Chase them away, Mamma!" Yura screamed, catching up with her and grabbing her hand.

"What's going on here?" Mother said to Kalugin as she tried to catch her breath.

"Did Yura sound the alarm? And I see you've brought the family along. No need to do that. The soldier-boys are butchering our pigs here."

Red spots appeared on Mother's face. "Who let them? What right have they to do that?"

Kalugin rolled a cigarette, lit up leisurely and blew out some acrid smoke. "You see, Anna," he said philosophically, "the only thing for sure now is that the war will cover all losses."

The soldier frowned and interrupted him. "Don't worry," he said to Mother. "My comrades really did butcher one of your pigs. But we have your collective farm's permission." He stuck his hand in his breast pocket, pulled out a scrap of paper with a purple seal and signature on it and handed the paper to Mother. She scanned the writing: "...Red Army unit ... is permitted to ..." and handed it back to him.

"But why did it have to be our best sow?" she asked in a barely audible voice.

Kalugin got back into the conversation. "You look at everything from a woman's point of view, Anna. Try figuring it out, though: Beluga wouldn't have been able to escape from the enemy, being as her legs are too weak and there's too much meat on her. And no pig-cart's been invented yet. So that the best way out for her is a soldier's dinner. This way she'll be doing her bit." He turned to the soldier and said, nodding at Mother, "She's our very best pig-tender. That's why she's taking it so hard."

"Oh, I see." The soldier went over to Yura, bent down and picked him up. Yura squirmed and kicked, pushing away from the man.

"Go 'way! Let me go! You're bad!" he shouted.

"You're a fine little fellow," the soldier said gently, holding Yura in a steely embrace. "You're a fine fellow and you have a kind heart. That's hard to have in times like these. You'll have a hard time."

Yura calmed down a bit and touched the medal on the soldier's chest.

"I got that long ago. I haven't earned anything in this war yet." He put Yura down and turned to Mother, saying, "So I hope everything's all right between us now."

"That's our house over there," she replied. "Come over. I'll cook the meat for you. And there's milk, too. You can rest and wash up. You can all stay over if you want to."

"That's very kind of you. They've smashed our regiment," he continued in a tired voice, "and we're on our way to be re-formed. Since we have no supplies, we eat whatever we are given at the collective farms."

"It's hard on everyone now," Mother said with a sigh.

The soldier sliced the air with his hand, then called Yura over, took a Red Army soldier's star from his pocket and handed it to him.

These were the first soldiers of the retreating forces that we had seen. Until then the Red Army units passing through our village had always been advancing, going westward.

The herd was bellowing, mooing, grunting and bleating. The sheep did not want to keep to the road but tried to get to the grass in the meadows. The drovers were as mad as hornets. They spurred their poor horses as they chased after the sheep and the cracking of their long whips sounded like pistol shots.

"Hey! Hey!" they shouted.

"Damn you!"

The entire village came out to see the collective farm's herd off. The women stood by the gates, staring at the dusty road, shielding their eyes with their hands. They looked at the receding herd until the dark cloud raised by hundreds of hooves disappeared on the far horizon.

"It's like being orphaned," Mother said sadly. "I don't know what I'll be doing now."

All that was left to the farm were several work horses, the chairman's riding horse, a dozen of the worst cows, and the leanest sheep and pigs, those that would not survive the long trek to Mordovia.

Uncle Pavel drove up to our house in a covered trap drawn by two horses. Despite the heat, he was dressed in a grey raincoat buttoned up to the neck, a khaki cap and leather boots that squeaked when he walked. He got down and came over to where we stood by the well.

"Well, I'm leaving, we might as well say goodbye." He kissed Mother, Zoya and picked up Yura, saying, "I don't know whether we'll see each other again or not, son. Be well!"

"Don't say such things, Pavel. Godspeed to you," Mother said.

Uncle Pavel set off towards the trap with heavy steps. He put his foot on the step and turned, saying to Mother, "Don't forget, Anna. Keep an eye on the house for me. Maybe Valya would like to live there."

The wheels clattered down the road.

"Everything's topsy-turvy." There were surprise and confusion in Mother's face. "I don't recognise him. Has he gone mad? Such grief has come to Russia and all he's worried about is his house."

Several days later Mother brought Father home from the hospital. He looked terrible. His head had been shaven, his cheeks were sunken, as were his eyes, and he limped about the house slowly and with great effort, leaning on a cane.

"I never thought he'd pull through," Mother said to Zoya and me. "After all, typhus is no joke."

The family was together again. Mindful of Uncle Pavel's request, I moved to his house.

Chapter 10

"HE DIED A HERO'S DEATH"

This time the dark-haired representative from the district centre was more simple and approachable than before. He entered the village Soviet office to which we had been summoned dressed in an army shirt without any insignia and wearing a commander's leather belt with a holster and pistol on his right hip.

"Hello, Komsomol comrades!"

"Hello," we answered raggedly.

"This is the situation, boys...." He pulled up a chair, straddled it, gripped the back and looked closely at each of us in turn. There were about a dozen of us, all of the same age, schoolmates and friends, and we were waiting impatiently to see what he would say.

"This is the situation, comrades. I'm speaking to you on behalf of the district Party Committee. There is evidence that nazi spies and saboteurs are active in our district. That's for one. Secondly, deserters have been spotted in the woods here recently. These men have betrayed our country in a time of trial. In a word, all kind of trash is coming to the surface and putting spokes in our wheels. There's no need for me to remind you of the times we're living in."

By now we had guessed there was something important in the offering.

"And so, comrades, the district Party organisation is forming strategic Komsomol groups in every settlement to disarm spies and saboteurs and to locate deserters. There should be a similar group active on the territory of your collective farm. I suggest you arm yourselves as best you can. There are certainly shotguns in the village. We'll consider that everyone present will be a member of the strategic YCL group. The question now is to appoint a commander." He looked at the list of names he held. "Which one of you is Gagarin?"

I rose.

"Is your mother a pig-tender?"

"She was. There aren't any pigs left now."

"I recall her. What is your name? Valentin? Well, Valentin Gagarin, you will head the group. That is, if there are no objections."

"No, there aren't," the other fellows said.

"Fine. As to your instructions.... Oh, what the hell! You're to patrol at night, and be at your posts starting today. The farm's horses will be at your disposal, for speed and efficiency are what count. That is all."

We trooped out of the office.

Low-lying, heavy clouds drifted over the village, heralding the approaching autumn and incessant rain.

The representative from the district centre pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit up and then held out the pack. It passed to each of us, and we suddenly felt terribly grown up and important.

"Comrade, can I ask you a question?" Volodya Belov said rather hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"I don't like to ask this, but why aren't you in the army? My father's older than you, and he's been fighting from the very start."

The man choked on his cigarette, coughed and then, wiping his tearing eyes, said sadly, "I'd be only happy if I were. I've handed in three applications to the draft board and to the Party Committee, and all to no effect. They keep saying that when I'm needed I'll be called up." He lit up another cigarette. "So you see, boys...."

We all felt very awkward. Volodya, seeing our embarrassment, mumbled, "Uh, don't feel bad. They'll take you sooner or later."

The man nodded, then shook my hand and wished us all good luck. He stood out in the road, apparently trying to pick up a ride to the district centre. We looked after him until he was lost among the crowd of refugees.

"Boy, are you dumb!" I said to Volodya. "Why'd you have to make a good man like him feel so bad?"

Since I was now in command of our strategic group, I saddled the chairman's horse. It had been idle for two long months.

We rode out of the village. A crowd of boys including that inseparable threesome, Yura, Volodya Orlovsky and Vanya

Zernov, with Yura obviously proud of my having been appointed commander, ran after us. The village women watched us from their windows and their porches and there was surprise, laughter and pity in their eyes. Indeed, we must have been a sorry sight: a group of teenage boys riding old horses, some saddled and some not, with our harmless shotguns slung over our shoulders.

We, however, considered ourselves to be a mighty and terrible armed force, ready to meet any danger head-on and valiantly.

We stopped outside the village and held a conference, deciding unanimously that if we stayed together we'd never cover the surrounding woods in a night. So we broke up into groups of two and three and each group was allotted a section.

Volodya Belov and I made up one pair.

"Go on home, Yura!" I shouted to my brother, for the boys were still milling about. "I'll bring you back a deserter by morning."

"What do I need one for?" he replied sagely.

The sun had but recently set, yet the woods were dark and cool.

"Be on the lookout," I said to Volodya. "They may have a bonfire going."

"You really think they'd decamouflage themselves that way?"

We picked up various military words and expressions quickly and tried to use them whenever possible.

Strange fears closed in on us together with the darkness. Our horses pushed on through the thicket, with branches cracking under their hooves. We were certain the noise could be heard for miles. We also wondered at what would happen if the spies, saboteurs and accursed deserters spotted us first instead of us spotting them. What would happen then? They were certainly better armed than we were. And they didn't wander about singly. They probably banded together in groups. What if they were already creeping up on us from behind? What if they had already trained their sights on us?

All at once we bolted from the forest, galloping out into a wheatfield. The stars shone down on the hard-packed dirt road. All was silence. Somewhere far beyond Gzhatsk, perhaps at Vyazma, flashes of light were penciled across the sky. We could hear the distant thunder. We guessed those were heavy guns firing.

A potato field began where the wheatfield ended. We

realised then how famished we were and decided that since the saboteurs were not making any campfires, we would. Then they'd come flocking to our fire and we'd capture them for sure.

We dismounted, hobbled our horses, dug some potatoes, pulled a few handfuls of straw from an old stack and soon had a blazing fire going.

Our roasted potatoes were delicious. We had worked hard at the threshing floor all day and were tired. Now, having satisfied our hunger, we sat leaning on each other's shoulder and presently fell asleep.

We awoke with a start and were dumbfounded. Four men were standing in front of us. Of the three dressed in civilian clothes two wore padded jackets and one wore a coat. The fourth man had on an army greatcoat and carried a rifle. A hand-grenade was clipped to his soldier's belt. They were all unshaven and were peering at us intently.

"Well, this is it," the thought flashed through my mind. "They're bandits. They're sure to kill us."

I wanted to get up, but my legs were as heavy as lead. I could feel Volodya shaking beside me. Where our guns? They were nowheres in sight.

"Hello, boys," the man in the greatcoat said politely. "Are you from around here?"

"Uh-huh," I mumbled.

"Which way is Gzhatsk? We're lost."

Volodya and I each shot out a hand, pointing towards Gzhatsk.

"I thought so."

He kicked at the ashes of our campfire with the toe of his tattered shoe. A black potato rolled out. He bent to pick it up, broke it in half and regretfully tossed away the charred pieces.

"What are you doing here, boys?"

"Uh, we're hun-hunting," Volodya stammered.

The man smiled sadly. "You don't have to hunt us. We're on the right side. We're from the Home Guard. But it was our bayonets against their tanks. There's nothing left of our volunteer division. Just us. No one else."

"That's enough," the man with the rifle interrupted. I noticed that he was wearing glasses.

We stood up. Our shotguns, which I was certain we'd never see again, were lying on the ground in back of us.

"Goodbye, boys." They headed across the unmown rye towards the Gzhatsk Road.

"Maybe my father's wandering around like that now, too," Volodya said glumly as we looked after them.

We untied the horses and headed for home, riding in silence all the way to the village.

Yura met us outside the village. He looked worried and upset. "He was probably concerned about us," I decided.

"I want to tell you something, Valya," he shouted, running up to me.

"Is it a military secret?" I said and laughed. "You can say whatever it is out loud."

But he did not smile. I pulled up my horse. Volodya continued on into the village.

"Give me your hands. I'll pull you up."

Yura scrambled up onto the horse's rump. "Uncle Vanya got killed in the war," he whispered right into my ear.

"Which Uncle Vanya?"

"Belov. Volodya's dad," he said and indicated Volodya.

"No!"

I don't think Volodya could have heard us, but he must have sensed something, for he suddenly spurred his horse on into a gallop.

We saw a crowd outside the Belovs' house when Yura and I came riding up through the back gardens. I jumped down and made my way through. Mother was supporting Uncle Vanya's wife, who had fainted. Her daughter Nina was splashing water from a cup into her face. Vitya, the youngest of the Belov children, was sobbing loudly. Volodya came up to me. He was as pale as a sheet. He handed me a slip of onionskin paper. The typewritten words jumped before my eyes. "Ivan Danilovich Belov ... died a hero's death ... defending his socialist Fatherland..." I finally made out the words.

Our kind, jovial neighbour, the father of my friends, was no more.

This was the first death notice to be received in our village.

All that day and for many days to come Yura stayed close to Father. He would sit down beside him at mealtimes. When Father, leaning on his cane, for he was still very weak, set off for the threshing or the collective-farm office, Yura would invariably accompany him, as if he were afraid to let him out of his sight.

Sorrows never come singly.

Ivan Belov's cousin Grigory was killed in action.

The Apletovs received two death notices at once: both boys, Ilya and Alexander, were killed in action.

Kuleshov, our energetic collective-farm chairman, died a hero's death. As did so many other fine men of our village.

In the evenings we would go on our usual rounds. After several frank talks we discovered that Volodya and I were not the only ones to have been scared out of our wits that first night of patrol duty. However, our confusion and fears were now a thing of the past. Our mounting hatred for the enemy helped us to overcome them, for as the fathers fell in battle their sons became men.

It was no easy task to capture a spy or a saboteur. From time to time we would hear of one being caught by the district militia. However we never did, although we all yearned to.

Chapter 11

THE FLYERS

The white shirt was carefully ironed and hung on the back of a chair. The ceiling was reflected in the smartly shined shoes. The shoes had been bought in Gzhatsk "before the war" and had never been worn. The small briefcase which held a primer, some notebooks and a pencil case, all of which had been put in the previous evening, was also set on the chair.

Yura was starting in school today.

Naturally, he was the one who was most excited. He had always been an early riser, up with our parents at the crack of dawn, but I was quite positive he hadn't slept a wink that night. He was up and about, walking around in his shorts, mumbling to himself. Indeed, he had become a very serious person of late, no longer creeping up on Zoya with a cup of cold water or pestering Boris and me.

I opened my eyes a crack and watched him.

Yura was standing by the window. He breathed on the pane, then drew some curving lines on it. Then he went to the mirror that hung between the windows, giving me a clear view of the crooked letters he had written on the pane. They were his initials, with the "Y" written upside-down.

He stood at the mirror for quite a while. I could see his reflection. It was of a boy with a high forehead, protruding ears and cropped hair, for Father had made short shrift of the summer's tangled locks the day before.

He must have noticed me watching him, for the reflection

suddenly pulled a long face and stuck out a pink tongue. "Get up! We'll be late for school."

There he was addressing me as a fellow schoolmate.

"I'm getting up, Yura."

Actually, I was in no rush, for my schooling had ended. With a war on, we older children had no time for school, since there were more important jobs to be done. But I said nothing, because I did not want to spoil his happy day and also because I felt sad at having to say goodbye to school. But I felt happy for Yura.

I thought he would have an easy time at school. He could read well, write a bit and was good at arithmetic.

But would he have a chance to go to school?

No one said a word about the war that morning or mentioned the fact that we could hear the echo of its rumblings. Battles were being waged too close for comfort. We did not want to spoil Yura's day. However, I could not escape from my unhappy thoughts. For how many more months would the war drag on? For how much longer would our Red Army continue falling back? Where, on which Russian plain, would it finally stop the enemy?

After breakfast Yura put on his new trousers and shirt and his new shoes.

"They aren't too tight, are they?"

"No, they're just right!"

"Turn around. Let's have a look at you," Father said. He examined his son closely and shoved him lightly towards the door. "Off to your education," he said.

"Wait, dear," Mother said. "I'll kiss you for good luck."

Yura frowned but offered her his cheek. "And take these along," she added, handing him two big apples.

"Come on, hurry," Yura said to Zoya who was slowly putting her books into her old briefcase. "Come on! We'll be late."

Boris ran up and grabbed Yura by the hand. "Let me carry your books."

"You're too little." Then he poked two fingers at Boris and said, "I'll butt you!"

"He's teasing me," Boris whined as always.

Yura smiled broadly, for he could not contain his joy at the arrival of this long-awaited day. "All right. Let's be friends. Come on, you walk me to school."

We stood at the window watching them for a long while. Zoya lead the way, with Yura and Boris, each holding on to the briefcase and chewing an apple, bringing up the rear.

Soon other first-graders came into view.

"There's not a single father to see them off," Mother said regretfully. "Remember how cheerful everything always used to be on the first day of school?"

None of us spoke of the war that morning. However, later on in the day, just as the first-graders' first day was ending, the war sent us a reminder of itself.

A fighter plane with red stars on the wings zoomed low over the village, nearly knocking the chimney off our house as it roared by. The windows rattled. I rushed outside. The chickens were rushing for shelter with a wild clacking.

The plane fell as swiftly as a stone thrown with great force into the swamp beyond the village, about a mile and a half from our house. An explosion was sure to follow.

I shut my eyes, but did not hear the awaited roar. What I did hear was a loud smack, as when wet clay is tossed against a wall.

"Don't just stand here. Run and see if the pilot's alive. Maybe you can help him," I heard Father saying. He must have come out right after me. I knew he would have run there himself, but he was still very weak after his illness.

By the time I got there the pilot had made his way to some dry ground. He had on a leather jacket and a flying helmet. He was still unsteady on his feet as he approached the boys who had come running to the site of the accident straight from school. He was smiling awkwardly, saying, "That's strange. Children are still going to school here."

"Are you wounded?"

"What? No, it's only a scratch. I hurt my foot a bit. It'll mend. Come over here, son. What's your name?"

"Yura. And this is my friend Volodya."

"Well, Yura, will you give me your hand? My name's Lartsev."

Just then a second fighter plane with red stars on its wings flew over the village. It noticed us, circled and dipped. The flyer picked up Yura, took his cap and began waving it, showing the other flyer which way to go. He must have been understood, for the plane turned and went down for a landing. It landed on a piece of dry, flat ground about a kilometre and a half from where we were.

"See if you can find me a couple of good boards, will you?" he said, turning to me.

This was no great problem, for there was an abandoned shed nearby. Without a moment's hesitation I pulled several planks off the side and we threw them on the soggy ground, making a bridge to the plane. Then only did I notice the terrible condition of the plane. The tail, wings and fuselage were peppered with holes. There wasn't a spot that was whole. Most amazing of all was the fact that the pilot was unscathed, his battered foot notwithstanding.

The second flyer soon appeared on the scene. He embraced his comrade, shouting, "You son of a gun! I thought you were done for. And here you are, you old dog!"

Thus, gesticulating and speaking excitedly, they went over the details of the recent dog-fight. We could not always follow what they were saying, but we understood the main point: the battered fighter plane had cost the Germans three of their own.

"Time to get to work," Lartsev said.

The swamp was drawing the plane down. The wheels were already out of sight, and it was resting on its wings.

At the flyers' request the boys raced off to the village for empty pails. When Yura returned with a pail there was a jug of cold milk, a loaf of bread and some cooked pork in it.

"What a wonderful fellow you are," Lartsev said and pulled a bar of chocolate from his pouch. "Here, this is for you and your friends. Thank you for the bread and milk, but you take the meat back home. It'll come in handy."

Yura fingered the chocolate, deciding what to do. Then he pulled the bright wrapper off resolutely and broke it into squares. The boys were upon him like a flock of hungry sparrows, leaving nothing for him.

"How's that, Yura?" the pilot said and chuckled, seeing the disappointment on his face. He dug into his pouch again and came up with a second bar. "We'll go halves on my emergency rations. I have to leave some, just in case. Gobble it up and we'll start work."

We threw ourselves into the job. Lartsev drained the gasoline from his engine into the pails which we carried to the other plane. Then we helped transfer ammunition, although there was very little left after the dog-fight.

The men were hot in their leather jackets and so they took them off. The boys gaped at the sight of the medals on their chests. To tell the truth, this was the first time I, too, had ever seen medals close up and not on a picture.

"What's this one? And what's this one?" the boys demanded. "The Order of the Red Banner.... The Order of the Red Star...."

Still flushed and excited from their recent battle in the air, they seemed to us the bravest and most handsome men on earth.

Yura never left Lartsev's side. He found him a thin, straight stick to use as a cane. Then he asked to be permitted to hold his map-case. He hung on Lartsev's every word.

"Tell you what, Yura. What do you say about having a look at the inside of the plane? Do you want to climb in?"

Yura turned pale from excitement. All he could manage was a mumbled "Uh-huh".

Lartsev swung him up into the pilot's seat and began pointing out the dials, saying, "This tells you how fast you're going.... And how high up you are.... And this is for steering.... This shows you how much oil's left. Ah, there's none left! Hey, don't touch anything! I don't want you suddenly flying off and me having to catch you."

"I'm just looking," Yura whispered.

It was nearly midnight when we parted. Each of us pleaded with the flyers to come and spend the night at our house, but they declined, having decided to sleep near the plane.

When we dashed outside the following morning we saw a column of black smoke rising from the battered plane in the swamp. The second plane was gone.

"They set fire to one plane and flew off together in the other," Father said.

"They've gone off to beat the nazis again," Yura added.

Soon after his space flight Yura received a letter postmarked Gorky. It was from Lartsev, the former Air Force pilot. He wrote that he had never forgotten his forced landing near the village of Klushino on that September day in 1941, the boys of the village, or Yura.

He went on to say that his comrade, and I unfortunately do not recall his name, was later killed in action. The letter read in part: "I could believe that a boy named Yura would one day grow up to be a flyer, but in the '40s we pilots could only dream of space flights."

I am quite convinced that of the many people who in one way or another influenced Yura in his long climb to space and who helped his dream take root and mature, these two

comrades, two brave flyers who landed near our village in 1941 played a definite part.

I shall never forget Yura's shining eyes as he sat in the pilot's seat of the fighter plane, his hands and face smudged with ink after his first day at school.

Chapter 12

INVASION

October brought incessant rain and gnawing uncertainty. The telephone wire to Gzhatsk had been cut. Our radio was silent. There were no more mail deliveries. All contact with the outside world had been severed and for an indefinite time.

One day I dropped in at the collective-farm office. It was empty, deserted and smelled of burnt paper. A wireless set, forgotten by all, stood on a small table. I turned it on unthinkingly and the sounds of an alien tongue interspersed with a bold and blaring march came through the static. It was the Germans, crowing over their successes.

They had cause for rejoicing. They had captured Brest, Minsk, Grodno, Lvov, Orsha, Smolensk and dozens of other towns and hundreds of villages. We knew all that from the old news dispatches of the Soviet Information Bureau. We also knew that in some places the German forces had pressed so far ahead that Gzhatsk and Klushino were now both in their rear.

Oh, they were rejoicing, for sure. But would they rejoice for long?

Late one night, when it was as black as pitch, I was returning home from patrol duty in the forest, wet and chilled to the bone. I was wondering of what good our search for saboteurs and deserters was. Even if I was lucky enough to capture a nazi collaborator, what would I do with him? I couldn't take him to Gzhatsk, for the road was unsafe, and there was no one in Klushino who was authorised to decide upon the matter. The boys were tired of patrolling, doing it more and more unwillingly, for they felt it was useless. Besides, there were not as many of us now as before. Some of the boys had gone East after our retreating army units; some who were still too young to be called up had been mobilised for work in defence plants.

The muddy road sloshed under the horse's hooves. I trusted his sense of direction and loosened the reins. He would always find the way home.

"Halt!"

The command came so loudly and unexpectedly that the horse snorted and reared. An unseen hand yanked at the bridle. Then the sharp beam of a flashlight was trained on my face, blinding me.

"Take the light off my face," I said.

"Turn it down," a voice that sounded familiar said. "I think it's one of our boys. Get down, boy, I want to talk to you."

I dismounted obediently.

The same familiar voice now continued in the darkness: "Don't you recognise me? I'm Victor Kachevsky. You haven't forgotten me so soon, have you? You're Valya Gagarin, Alexei Gagarin's son, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, calming down, for I recognised my fellow villager. Kachevsky had been called up at the outbreak of war. He had been a driver on the farm before that. The Kachevskys were the Belovs' neighbours.

I could tell by the loud breathing and several coughs that there were others with him. "Don't worry," he said, "these are all reliable fellows. The reason we stopped you is to find out whether there are any Germans in the village."

"Not yet. Our troops passed through today. They were retreating. How'd you get here?"

"That's how we got here, too. By retreating. It's a popular word nowadays."

There were anger and bitterness in his voice. He quickly explained that their unit had been making its way out of encirclement in small groups and that he and his seven comrades, all of whom were from Siberia or the Urals, had attempted to cross the front line and reach Moscow, but each time they had fallen upon German covering detachments and had retreated, fighting. Finally, they had reached the environs of Klushino.

"The Germans are in Gzhatsk, too. Has there been any word of partisans?" the soldiers asked.

"Didn't you say there was fighting all over? How could there be partisans here?" I said in surprise. "No, there aren't any here, and there's been no talk of them, either."

"Well, if there aren't any now, there will be," one of the men said in a deep voice. "Lead us to your village, Kachevsky. We're hungry and it won't be a bad idea to dry our things. Snug as a bug, that's the idea."

We parted at the village. I noted that each man carried a rifle.

Everything was in an uproar at home. As I crossed the threshold Father bellowed, "Where the hell have you been? We're getting ready to leave, and you're out taking the air."

"Leave for where?"

Then I noticed the plywood suitcase bound with a length of washline, the many bundles tied up in kerchiefs and the family dressed for a journey.

I sank down on the bench and burst out laughing. It must have been the tension. Yura, Boris and Zoya sat side by side on the stripped bed. They stared at me in fright.

"It's too late," I barely choked the words out, convulsed as I was with stupid laughter. "It's too late, Dad."

"Shut up! We'll harness the horse and be in Gzhatsk in two hours. We'll go to Mozhaisk from there, and that's practically next door to Moscow. Then we'll move on to Mordovia, to Uncle Pavel. I have his address."

"The Germans are in Gzhatsk. They're everywhere now." I told them of meeting Kachevsky and his comrades, strong, grown men and each of them armed. They were not tied down by baggage, but still, they hadn't managed to cross the front line. We, on the other hand, had small children and all our belongings to weigh us down.

Just then we heard six explosions in succession. The windows rattled. Heavy guns were shelling Klushino. Perhaps it was an enemy battery finding its range, or perhaps it was our own forces that had made a mistake. No one could tell now.

I was afraid to go outside and see what was happening, for a shell had fallen in the garden. However, it was just as terrible to remain indoors, because if a shell hit the house it would be the end of us. The house would then become a family grave.

Father took off his padded jacket and sat down to pull off his boots. Then he said, "Untie the bundles, Mother, and make up the beds. We have to get a good night's sleep. That'll give us a fresh head for the morning."

The next morning Zoya and Yura set off for school as usual. An hour and a half later the grapevine brought us the news: there were Germans on motorcycles at the village Soviet. A large enemy force occupied the village that same day.

I was still staying at Uncle Pavel's house. The nazis had quartered a general and his large retinue with me.

I was prohibited from leaving the premises. I even had to have permission to go to the outhouse, to be granted by the fat sergeant major who was in charge of the general's household.

The humiliating position I now found myself in was made worse by the fact that I knew nothing of my parents, brothers and sister. How were they? And were they still alive? Naturally, no villager dared approach the general's house, and so I had no one with whom I could send a message to the family.

Early one morning I went over to the window in the passage and tried to see what was going on outside. The street was deserted save for a woman going quickly for water and a boy darting from one house to the next. The entire view consisted of blue smoke curling up from the chimneys.

Suddenly I spied Yura. This was so unexpected that at first I thought I was mistaken.

No, I was not.

He was quite close, not more than twenty paces from the gate where a tall sentry stood guard, a submachine gun resting on his barrel chest. Yura was sitting on a patch of grass by a small ditch, dangling his feet in the ditch, stealing a glance every so often at Uncle Pavel's house.

"He's come to find out how I am," I decided. "I wonder how many times he's been here before?"

How could I signal to him? I couldn't go out into the street. Since the general had the front room, the windows that faced on the street were out of bounds.

I'd have to chance it. I'd go out into the garden and open the gate. The sentry would surely holler, but he wouldn't shoot me. At any rate, Yura would see me and would be able to tell the family that I was all right. He might even be able to shout a few words to me.

I headed for the door. Just then fat-face yelled from the kitchen: "Ivan? Komm, Ivan!"

To him I was, as was every Russian, a nameless Ivan.

The sergeant major stood in the middle of the kitchen with his fingers stuck under his belt. A chef in a white cap stood by the brick oven.

The sergeant major nodded towards the yard and said, "Get hen! Fünf hen! Kvik!"

There were about thirty or forty of Uncle Pavel's hens left in the coop. Each day the general's household consumed no less than five of them.

How was I to attract Yura's attention? It was too dangerous to call him. I took a hen from the roost, holding it under my left arm, while with my right hand I began to carefully press out the small pane of glass fixed in the wall with clay.

If only Yura noticed my signal and understood it correctly.

The pane fell softly to the ground. I pushed the hen through the opening and gave it shove. It cackled loudly as it flapped down to the gate, over it and plopped to the ground at the sentry's feet. He looked at it indifferently, spat, shifted his gun and continued pacing up and down along the fence.

The dazed and sleepy hen ran clucking down the dusty road. Good for Yura! He realised that it had not simply strolled out of the gate. He jumped up and set off along the fence towards the sentry, passing the house. Soon he was abreast of the chicken coop.

"Yura," I called. "Can you hear me, Yura?"

He stopped and turned towards my voice. He was astonished, then beamed. "Where are you?"

"Inside the coop. Don't just stand there. Walk up and down along here and tell me how everyone is." To be on the safe side I took another hen off the roost and stuck it under my arm. Then I put my face to the opening in the wall.

"Ivan!"

I started and turned. My tormentor, the sergeant major, was standing behind me in his favourite pose with his fingers stuck under his belt. His full lips were curved in a smirk. The fascist dog had crept up on me and caught me unawares. It served me right for throwing caution to the winds.

He took the hen from under my arm and without saying a word swung it and hit me full in the face. He kept on hitting me.

"Where are you, Valya? Let's go home, Valya," Yura wailed outside.

The fascist hit me again.

"I didn't do anything!" I shouted.

"Shat ap!" he bellowed as he kept swinging and hitting me. "Get hen!" he finally said, holding up four fingers.

By then the hens had all run out of the coop and scattered in the yard. I went to catch four of them, knowing that the filthy chicken thief would not stand for any dallying.

When he finally went back inside I made for the hole in the wall, but Yura was gone.

About two days later the sergeant major left for the supply depot early in the morning. The general had not slept in that night, nor had he appeared for dinner or supper. The German help, seeing there was no one around, decided to have a ball.

"Ivan!" one of the soldiers shouted. Then, mixing in a few Russian words with German, he tried to make me understand. The "trinken Russische Schnappe" and "harry-harry" plus a lot more were to tell me that they would like to get some home-brewed vodka and were willing to pay German marks for it.

"All right," I said, sensing that I might put the venture to use. They would let me outside the gate, and I'd be on my own then.

Unfortunately, they were more cunning than I thought. The soldier who had explained my task to me took up his gun and pointed towards the door. I had no choice but to set out together with him. I led him through the village, choosing a route that would take me past our house. He kept about two paces behind. For all the world we were like a guard and his prisoner. All that was lacking was the butt of his rifle prodding my back.

The first person I saw when our house came into view was Father. He dragged his lame leg as he appeared on the porch and carried a spade. Mother and Zoya, each carrying a spade, followed.

I slowed down, worried by my father's glum face. Mother and Zoya looked just as tense. They turned the corner of the house. None of them had noticed me. Then Yura appeared from around the corner, carrying a brick in each hand. He looked very important, but did not notice me, either.

I had slowed down and all but stopped.

"Schneller!" the soldier ordered. "Schneller, Ivan!"

"That's my house, understand?" I said heatedly. "My mother and father are there. Understand?"

"Schneller!" he roared.

I was only too happy at the noise he was making. Yura appeared from behind the corner again. He was looking towards us.

"Valya!" His hands fell to his sides and he dropped the bricks. "Daddy! Mamma! A soldier's taking Valya away!"

That very same moment Mother, Father and Zoya rushed to the porch. They looked at me with apprehension.

"Don't worry, we're out hunting for home-brew!" I shouted. "What are you digging?"

"A dugout. The dogs have chased us out of the house. We lived in the loft for a while, but they won't let us stay there any more."

"Schneller!" the soldier ordered and shoved me in the back.

I forced myself to walk faster. The last words I heard were spoken by my father. He said, "Be careful, Valya. Don't stick your neck out for nothing."

"Weg!" the soldier shouted at Yura, who was approaching.

We took another road back and bumped into the sergeant major outside the gate. He snatched the bottles of vodka we carried and smashed them against the fence astonishing the sentry. Then his fist went crashing into my trembling guard's face.

"It serves you right," I thought gleefully, recalling how he had kept prodding me all the way. At least I had seen the family during my enforced outing and was not as worried about them as I had been.

I had been a prisoner in the house for two weeks. If I wasn't catching hens, chopping wood or carrying water I was supposed to stay on the scorching shelf of the large brick oven, day and night.

My arms, legs and body were burned from the heat. It was suffocating, it made me nauseous. I tossed and turned on the coarse piece of linen sacking which could not protect me from the heat and hatched my plans. I would get even with that fat-faced sergeant major. I might pour a cauldron of boiling water on him. It would kill him, but then they'd shoot me. No, that was no good. Perhaps I could creep up on him in the yard and crack his skull with a stick of firewood? But where would I hide his body? They'd be sure to find it.... "Don't stick your neck out for nothing," Father's words came back to me.

However, these sweet dreams of revenge were my only consolation.

A victrola played nasally in the front parlour. The door was ajar, and the air was filled with drunken voices and the sound of popping corks. The general and his retinue were celebrating the latest German victory. The sergeant major, the chef and two soldiers dashed back and forth with plates of food and bottles with bright labels.

An SS officer in a black tunic looked into the kitchen. "Hey! Ivan! Rus!" he shouted. He was a huge man with a patch over his left eye.

I hid behind the chimney.

He pulled up a stool and got on it. His hand found me. He clutched my collar and said, "Komm!" yanking me off the oven shelf. "Ve go!" He shoved me towards the outside door. Then, putting his head into the parlour, he shouted some-

thing. The crowd of drunken officers poured out of the room. The interpreter and a young lieutenant had the tipsy general under the arms.

"Go into the orchard," the interpreter said to me.

I sensed that nothing good would come of the outing, but never could I have dreamed of what was to follow. I was led up to the fence and my arms were pulled apart. An empty bottle was thrust into each of my hands. Then the SS officer counted off ten paces and drew a line on the ground with his boot. The officers crowded behind the line.

It was getting dark. My body was covered with gooseflesh. I couldn't think, I was gripped by a dull feeling of apathy.

The one-eyed SS officer was the first to shoot. Luckily for me he was a good shot. Both bottles smashed to bits in my hands. The flying splinters cut my face, drawing blood.

The young lieutenant ran up to me and thrust two more bottles into my hands. Someone handed the general a pistol. He swayed uncertainly as he raised it.

I shut my eyes, bidding the world farewell.

A shot followed. At any rate, all I heard was one shot, though there were two bullets. One bit into the wood of the fence over my shoulder and the other smashed one of the bottles.

There was a round of applause and much exclaiming. I opened my eyes. The officers were falling all over themselves in their haste to congratulate the general, as he graciously shook hands with all and smiled. The interpreter was standing off to a side under an apple tree, toying with the strap of his open holster.

Someone handed the general another pistol but he belched drunkenly, turned and headed unsteadily towards the house. The officers followed.

Truly, I had been born with a silver spoon in my mouth!

I clambered onto the oven, shaken by chills and cold on the hot bricks.

The merry-making continued unabated in the parlour.

"Hey, boy!" I heard someone calling in Russian.

The interpreter was looking at me. He held a glass of vodka in one hand and a slice of thickly buttered bread in the other. "Drink this. It'll settle your nerves."

My teeth clattered on the rim of the glass. I managed to swallow the lump in my throat and gulped down the vodka without feeling the taste of it.

"Climb down. Someone's waiting for you out there," he said and led me out onto the porch with his hand under my elbow.

He took me to the gate, opened it and spoke to the sentry in German. The armed sentry stood listening to the interpreter with a bored expression, then nodded towards the road.

"Your brother's waiting for you. You can talk to him," the interpreter said.

Yura was standing in the road.

"Why were they shooting here, Valya?" he asked when I came up to him.

I did not answer. Instead, I headed down the village street. Yura hurried along behind as I stalked farther and farther away from that terrible house. I never stopped until I reached my family's dugout.

"You're as pale as a ghost," Mother gasped. She fussed over me and could not calm down. This was too much for me. I began to cry, choking out my story between sobs.

"You won't go back there for anything," Father said sternly. "Go to bed and sleep it off."

Yura put his thin arm around my neck and said, "You sleep in my bed, next to me."

The earthen ledges that served as beds were covered with thin straw mattresses. I got over to the wall. Yura settled down beside me, threw his arm around me again and was soon fast asleep. As I listened to his warm breathing I gradually began to calm down and was finally overcome by a terrible desire to sleep, sleep, sleep....

The last thing I saw before I dozed off was Father setting his axe by the door. Then he blew out the flickering oil wick.

The next morning I was awakened by Yura's shouting. He had thrown open the door and was yelling: "Hooray! The Germans have gone! There's not a single one left!"

Indeed, the entire unit had moved on towards Moscow.

Ours was not a religious family, but all that day I fervently prayed that the general, his fat-faced sergeant major and the one-eyed SS officer would find their graves on the way.

That same morning I learned that Yura was responsible for my having been freed from the general's prison. He had been loitering about on the patch of grass outside Uncle Pavel's yard every day in the hope of seeing me. When he heard the pistol shots in the orchard he ran up to the sentry and told him heatedly that his parents had sent him to see his big brother and he wouldn't budge until he did. The sentry then called the interpreter.

I don't know who that interpreter was. Nevertheless, I was let off.

Chapter 13

NAMELESS HEROES

I may be asked why I have described the war years in such detail. There are many reasons, but the chief ones are as follows.

The terrible calamity that had suddenly struck our family, as it had every other family in the country, left an indelible mark on each of us, from the eldest to the youngest, determining our future for many years to come. I recall that in those difficult times the bond that tied us was stronger than ever before. We felt a great concern for each other. It was during these years that Yura and I became so close, despite the difference in our ages.

I believe that such qualities as perseverance, courage and readiness to always come to another's aid that were so characteristic of Yuri Gagarin, the flyer and cosmonaut, were formed at that time. During the war we witnessed the amazing courage of the Soviet people. Such heroism could not but leave a lasting impression and serve as a model to Yura.

I shall disrupt the chronology of events somewhat and describe several unforgettable episodes. Unfortunately, neither Yura nor I knew the names of the heroes I will speak of.

The front line now passed close to Klushino. Thus, we found ourselves living among the advance forces of the German army. A large nazi detachment was quartered in the neighbouring village of Myasoyedovo. Every now and then shells fired either by Soviet or enemy guns would explode in the streets of our village.

In the beginning the Germans were so cocksure they did not even bother to post sentries outside the village. The children took advantage of this, going freely off into the woods or meadows.

One morning we were awakened at dawn by rapid firing. We rushed to the tiny window in the dugout but all we could make out at first were dozens of booted feet. The boots were flared at the top. These were German soldiers, and they were all running towards the woods.

A Russian battle cry went up from the woods! Then a heavy shell whizzed by. The German artillery in the rear had opened fire.

"Goodness, are our forces advancing?" Mother said aloud, expressing the thought we all shared.

Our forces were advancing! It was impossible to remain inside. We had a terrible urge to rush out into the street and run towards them.

German tanks rumbled towards the woods. We heard hand grenades exploding. The firing became sporadic and finally died down.

No one noticed when Yura sneaked out of the dugout. All of a sudden we simply realised he was gone. As I was about to set out to look for him, he reappeared and signalled to me. We went outside together.

"Well?"

"There's a Red commander in the woods. He's wounded real bad."

We quickly wrapped some food in Mother's kerchief, took along an old shirt to use as bandages and headed for the woods.

The wood seemed alien with the tops of the trees sliced off by shells and shreds of Red Army and German soldiers' clothing hanging from the branches.

Yura led me to a large snowball tree covered with fiery-red berries.

The commander was lying on the ground on his back. There were several large, dark bloodstains on his shirt. His eyes were closed. A rifle with an open bolt, a map-case and an anti-tank bomb lay by his side.

"We've brought you something to eat," Yura said.

The wounded man opened his eyes, glanced at Yura and looked at me closely. "Is this your brother?"

Yura nodded and untied the kerchief. However, the commander did not want to eat. Jostling each other in our haste, we tore the shirt into strips and tried our best to bandage his wounds.

He told us that his group had been fighting its way out of encirclement. We, however, had thought the Germans were being chased back from the approaches to Moscow.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He shook his head. We understood we were not to ask and so waited for him to speak, if only to suggest some way in which we might help him, but he closed his eyes again and his breath came in short, quick gasps.

"Can you hear me?" Yura said and touched his shoulder. "There are Germans in our village. You can't come there while

it's light. We'll tell Daddy and he'll think of something. Then, as soon as it gets dark, we'll hide you someplace. We'll help you. Can you hear me?"

"That's fine, boys. Real fine." He tried to smile but grimaced instead.

"You wait for us here!"

We ran all the way back to the village, convinced that our parents would find a way out.

"We can hide him at the mill. The Germans never go there," I said.

"Or we can make a dugout in the woods and bring him food there." Yura suggested.

We spotted German soldiers armed with submachine guns at the edge of the woods and hid in the bushes. They passed within several feet of us. A short while later a loud explosion issued from where the wounded commander lay under the bush. It was so forceful it sent a wave of air over us.

"What was that, Valya?"

"I don't know. He must have blown them up with his bomb."

I had guessed correctly. There was much talk in the village afterwards of the Red Army commander who had blown himself and a group of nazis up with an anti-tank bomb.

* * *

I met the Belov brothers a short while ago. Yevgeny and Victor had both come upon the same commander in the woods that day and had also wanted to help him. But they had also been too late.

The war was in its second year when six Soviet IL fighter planes passed over the village. Shortly after there was a sound like rolling thunder not too far away. "It must be our planes bombing," we decided.

Yura, Volodya Orlovsky and I were standing by our dugout when the ILs returned. Just then the German ack-ack guns opened fire. No one in the village knew just where they were located, for planes with red stars on their wings had flown over the village before, but no guns had ever fired on them. Now they were blasting away.

Five of the fighters slipped through the barrage. The sixth suddenly began to smoke and went into a dive.

"Oh, they've hit it, the bastards!"

The streets of Klushino were jammed with vehicles of every sort. There were tanks, armoured carriers and trucks, all of which formed an endless stream which had been moving towards Moscow for days now.

Traffic had come to a stop when the planes first appeared. Then, seeing that one of them was smoking, the Germans began shouting, whistling and hooting.

The plane was dropping lower and lower. Suddenly its machine guns opened fire on the column. It was heading straight into the column like a burning torch. This all took place in a matter of seconds. A terrible explosion followed.

"He did what Gastello did," Yura said softly.

We had heard of Gastello's heroism some time before the Germans came to Klushino.

The next morning five fighter planes appeared overhead again. Perhaps it was the same five that had lost their comrade the day before. They passed over the battery at zero altitude. The guns never had a chance to fire. A few minutes later all that remained of the battery was a mangled heap.

In the days that followed special detachments worked on unearthing the bodies from the caved-in caponiers in which the battery had been located. They transported the bodies to the village square where the monument to Commissar Sushkin which they had blown up had once stood. Soon the entire area between the church, the school, the village Soviet and the general store was filled in with rows of white birch crosses crowned by iron helmets.

Yura and some other boys went over to see the nazi soldiers being buried. "Boy, did our planes get a lot of nazis!" he said excitedly at supper.

Father tried to hide his smile as he said, "Everything's proceeding as it should, Yura. When the French retreated from Moscow in 1812 they buried a lot of their soldiers in Klushino. We built your school on the site. Now the Germans are here. One day we'll build something on that site too."

Father's words came true.

No trace remains of those birch crosses on Klushino's main square. There is a large modern community centre there instead.

The monument to Commissar Sushkin, courageous Bolshevik and Civil War hero, has been restored. Nearby, a short twenty paces away, is a bust of Yura. They stand together at the intersection of all the village streets, facing all the winds.

Chapter 14

YURA BATTLES THE DEVIL

One German unit replaced another, but life did not become any easier for that. There was now a pompous colonel living in Uncle Pavel's house instead of the general. I had learned my lesson and was living with the family again.

This time our house was turned into a repair shop for communications equipment. Batteries were recharged here, too. A soldier named Albert was in charge of the shop. We called him Devil, for he was as mean as the devil, harbouring a special hatred for children.

It was one of those rare autumn days when the sun is bright and warm, though the rain puddles were covered with a thin film of ice during the night. Vanya Zernov, Volodya Orlovsky, Yura and Boris were playing ball with a rag ball Mother had made them. The heavy rag ball was no match for a rubber ball, for when it hit you it fell to the ground instead of bouncing off. However, the boys were only too happy to have it, for where would one find a real ball now?

Boris was usually "it", since he was younger than the other boys and not as agile. Now again the clumsy little fellow ran for the ball, threw it at Volodya and missed. Then he tried to tag Vanya and missed again. Ah, he'd try for Yura. He hit him!

"That's not fair, Yura. You let him get you," Volodya fumed.

"Well, he's still little," Yura retorted.

Just then Devil appeared on the porch. His greatcoat was thrown over his shoulders and his field cap was pushed back on his blond head. He squinted his watery eyes at the bright sun. He was obviously bored. He finally came off the porch and placed something on the bottom step.

"Come!" he shouted to the boys.

The boys stopped their game and approached.

"Take!" the German said.

There were several lumps of large-grained sugar on the step. The children had not seen any sugar in ages and the sight of it made their mouths water. However, no one budged. Then, Boris, the most trusting of the lot, bent down and reached for a lump.

"Don't you dare!" Yura said in a barely audible voice.

But the German grinned cheerfully and urged, "Take, take!"

At the very moment Boris' fingers touched the precious lump of sugar, Devil's heavy boot came down on his hand. There was a crunching sound. Boris screamed.

"Let him go! Let him go, you rat!" Yura shouted.

But Devil did not move his foot. He was grinning maliciously. Boris kept on screaming. Yura took a few steps backward, got a running start and butted the German in the stomach, just under his shiny buckle. Devil gasped and fell in a heap. He sat there with a dazed expression on his face, his mouth gaping. The crushed and dirty lump of sugar was spread out on the step.

Vanya and Volodya dashed around the corner, but Yura took Boris by the hand and led him towards the dugout. He turned and said, "Just you wait, Devil, I'll get even with you!"

The soldier came to his senses and made for them, but at that very moment a truck pulled up outside and blew its horn. Soldiers of the tank forces began unloading weird, tremendous batteries from the back of the truck. There were eight batteries in all. The soldiers carried them into the shop.

For several days after Devil was busy recharging them. Then one day at noon he got on his bicycle and rode off. Some while later he returned in a truck. The tankmen loaded the batteries into it. When their officer shook Devil's hand he beamed.

After the truck was gone Devil brought a victrola and a bottle of wine out onto the porch and sat down to have himself a good time. The old and scratchy record was "Katyusha", a popular Russian song. He kept pouring the wine down his gullet in tiny glasses, puckering his face happily after each drink.

However, his joy was short-lasted. A siren sounded menacingly outside. Devil put down the lid of the victrola and ran into the street.

The same tankmen were carrying the same eight batteries back into the yard. They looked angry. Devil stood stiffly at attention in front of the enraged officer and was making excuses.

We couldn't understand what had happened until Yura said proudly, "I got even with him when he rode off on his bike today."

"What did you do?"

Yura stuck his hand into the pocket of his shorts and brought out a pinch of caustic soda. "I poured some into each of them."

Mother moaned. "Take your pants off this minute, you awful child! Hear me?"

Yura had obviously expected to be praised and could not understand why he was to be punished. After all. Mother couldn't stand Devil, either.

"Do you have any more soda?" she demanded as she filled the washtub with the water.

Yura was never one to lie and so he said, "There's some more in my jacket pocket."

"Give it to me. I'll have to wash it, too."

In the evening, when Mother told Father what had happened, he did not get angry, as expected, but called Yura over and said. "Who told you to do that?"

"Nobody."

"Things like that should be done carefully," Father admonished. "Do you know we might all have been shot for that? You don't? Well, you know it now."

Luckily, Devil never guessed who was responsible for the defective batteries. We certainly would have been in for trouble if he had.

January 1942 brought hope of liberation. The remains of the German forces that had been destroyed at the approaches to Moscow were retreating westward.

Yura and Boris spent their days at the fence, watching the columns of retreating troops, tanks, trucks and guns. They had nothing else to do. for there was no school during the German occupation.

The winter was a fierce one that year. The retreating nazis would break into the dugouts and plunder everything in sight: sheepskin coats, blankets, felt boots, the last of any clothing and pillows. They did not disdain to snatch up runners from the floor or any stray rags.

One evening at supper, when we were eating boiled potatoes from the pit in which we kept our seed potatoes, opened before time and in secret from the Germans, Yura said, "I saw a lot of Frenchmen today."

"Which Frenchmen?"

"Where'd they come from?"

"How do I know?"

"What are they like?"

"They have ladies' kerchiefs on their heads and ladies' coats on, too. And all of them are on horseback."

That day a cavalry unit had passed through the village. We all laughed.

"Those were Germans, Yura," Father said.

"No, they weren't. They were Frenchmen. There's a picture of them in Zoya's book."

"They're still Germans, son. That's because they're so scared of our cold winter. I hope the cold lasts a long time," Mother concluded.

The nazis took their disappointment at their military defeats out on us. Devil, who was always crazy-mean, now seemed out of his mind. As soon as he'd appear on the porch the boys would make for the dugout to get out of reach of his fist or, worse still, of the acid he always tried to splash in their faces.

Although my brothers tried to keep out of his way, they were not quick enough in the end. One day Yura and Boris were standing by the fence. A plank was blocking Boris' view. He tried to pry it loose. Naturally, he was not strong enough to do it and Yura, as always, came to his aid.

That was when Devil crept up on them. He raised Boris by the collar of his coat, crossed the ends of his scarf around his neck, tied a knot in back and hung my brother by this noose on a nearby branch. Devil laughed with glee and headed back into the house.

Boris screamed. The tight noose was choking him. He kicked and jerked and finally went limp.

Yura was jumping up and down, trying to knock Boris off the branch, but it was too high. Just then Devil rushed out of the house with his camera and pushed Yura aside.

"Mamma, Devil's hung Boris!" Yura shrieked as he burst sobbing into the dugout.

Mother streaked out into the yard in her dress. Devil was busy clicking the shutter. She ran towards Boris, but he blocked her way.

"Oh, you...!" she screamed. I never will know where she found the strength to shove the German aside. Then she undid the knot with a jerk and Boris fell into the snow.

Boris was barely breathing when they brought him into the dugout. He could not walk for a month afterwards, and kept screaming in his sleep.

Soon after this happened Devil's small engine broke down. It did not take him long to find the cause: the exhaust was packed tight with rags and paper.

Devil burst into our dugout and tossed the packing onto the table. Then he turned everything upside down, looking for similar rags and paper, but luckily did not find any. He slammed the door savagely as he left, sending down trickles of sand and earth from the ceiling.

"Thank goodness he's gone," Mother breathed.

All through Devil's search Yura had been sitting innocently in the corner, but he later confessed that he had packed the exhaust pipe with rags. However, our parents did not scold him this time.

Our hopes for being liberated in the near future were not to be realised. The nazi forces that had met with defeat near Moscow passed through Klushino on their way to be reformed in the rear and from there fresh units were being constantly drawn up.

The front line was now located within seven kilometres of our village. From this time on our life became hell.

A great number of men and materiel were massed in Klushino. The Soviet forces on the other side were certainly informed of this, for soon heavy guns began shelling the village every day. Naturally, it was heartening to see the Germans scatter like roaches at the Soviet barrage, but it gave one the chills, too, for any of the shells might mean our end as well. After all, the shells did not have eyes to tell friend from foe.

The nights were terrible, for PO-2 bombers began bombing the village. There was talk that these small night bombers were piloted by girl flyers and that is why the PO-2 bomber was nicknamed Maria Ivanovna.

One evening we were whiling the time away as usual in our dugout. It was too early to go to bed, and just sitting around made us all depressed. Our talk seemed to revolve around the same topic: when would our side's forces retake the village? A wick made of thread floated in the tin dish of the oil lamp. The dim light cast pale rings on the uneven earthen walls. The family's faces seemed alien and unrecognisably sharp in the gloom. Mother was sewing something, while Father patched Boris' felt boot.

Suddenly a moving, deathly-white light broke in on us through the tiny window. The faint light cast by the oil lamp was dissolved, disappearing in the steady beam. The air raid siren blew low and menacingly, a warning to all to seek shelter. There was nowhere for us to hide. The thin earthen layer of our roof was our only protection.

The PO-2s sent up flares to light the village. Then bombs began to fall. A terrible explosion seemed to raise our dugout out of the ground and us together with it. Sand came pouring

down on our heads. My ears felt stuffed with cotton. Though the wick went out, it was still as light as ever inside.

As my hearing gradually returned, I heard Yura saying from very far off, "Hooray, Mamma! Maria Ivanovna bombed the daylights out of Devil!"

Mother's lips moved, but I could not understand what she said.

"Speak louder!" I shouted. Then I lost my hearing again. Was I going to be deaf? No, sounds were penetrating again.

Yura was sitting on the earthen bed ledge, whittling.

"What are you making?"

"A cross for Devil's grave."

The flares went out in the dark sky. Once again a black gloom settled over our dugout which the feeble light of the wick was unable to dispel.

"What are you so happy about, Yura?" Mother said.

"Silly child. Now we have no house left. You don't know what a job it was building it ourselves. Now where will we live after the war's over?"

"My God, what a thing to worry about!" Father sounded exasperated. "We can only hope the war ends quickly. We'll build a new house then, you can be sure of that."

"We sure will," Yura piped up. "You know how good everything will be after the war, Ma? And I'll go back to school again!"

"Yes, you certainly will, son."

Yura tied the two sticks crosswise with a bit of a string. "How's that for a cross?"

"It'll hold better if you nail them together," Father advised.

However, our joy was premature. There was no need for the cross. A bomb had fallen in front of the house and a shell splinter had knocked out a pane. It had ripped the window-sill and landed in the pillow on which Devil lay sleeping. He had got drunk that evening and had either been too lazy to seek shelter during the raid or had not heard the siren. Death had been but an inch away from his head.

"It was his good luck," Mother said sadly. "If only fine people like our soldiers had his luck."

However that may be, this was the last night Devil was to spend in our house. The next morning he moved to a dugout in the garden, as far away as possible from the road and the village cottages.

Although the repair shop was still located in the house, Devil

did not pursue the boys as before. Mangled machine parts were forever being carted into the shop and he apparently had no time left for us.

Chapter 15

1942

War and want are both good teachers.

In the spring we put on our rubber boots, took our baskets and waded knee-deep in the mud of our plot, scrounging around for frozen potatoes that had been overlooked in the fall. These potatoes were then dried over a fire and grated to make potato starch. Pancakes made of this starch mixed with bran were a sickly blue in colour and as sticky as glue. However, we gobbled them up, especially when they were piping hot off the pan. Still, a gnawing feeling of hunger haunted us day and night.

Yura and Boris had a job of their own. They would put on their mittens in the morning and then scout around the ditches, picking young nettles. Mother would then cook us nettle soup, adding a drop of milk to make it more appetising. To tell the truth, there was never any left over. We could have consumed a pailful. The boys grazed on whatever they could: the tender leaves of sorrel, young shoots of horse-tail and the sweetish roots of young thistles.

The sun was becoming warmer. Starlings cried shrilly over the rooftops, and the fragrance of apple trees about to burst into blossom tickled our nostrils.

"We're going to plant the plot today," Mother said one morning.

After breakfast we sat around a small and pitiful heap of seed potatoes, cutting them into pieces: the smaller ones in half, the larger ones into thirds or quarters. We had to cut them in such a way as to leave a few "eyes" in each piece, otherwise they would not take root.

All of us, including Yura and Boris worked intently, in silence and quickly. They were both happy to be using sharp knives and were competing to see which of them worked the faster. Our hands were black from potato starch, our cheeks were pink from the fresh air. We had so lacked fresh air in the dugout which had become so hateful during the long winter.

I don't know what the others were thinking about as we worked, but I recalled other springs, prewar springs. How

happy and carefree we had been! I remembered leading a horse home from the collective farm early in the morning to plough our potato patch. Mother would call over the neighbour women to help her with the planting and by noon the merry group would have finished the job.

Father came up and stood over us. "I've just been to see the farm's winter wheat," he remarked.

"How is it?" Mother asked anxiously.

"It's coming up fine."

"I hope our people can harvest and thresh it for themselves."

"So do I," Father retorted glumly. I had noticed that Father never laughed or smiled any more.

The previous autumn the Germans had blown up the village church and the windmill, correctly surmising that they both served as good reference-points for Soviet planes and artillery. The millstones had been taken to an old barn near the cemetery, as had the small engine. Soon after Misha Syutev, the village elder appointed by the Germans, showed up in our dugout.

"You'll have to be the miller now," he said to Father. "There aren't any other skilled men around, and the commandant knows you're a jack-of-all-trades."

"What? Me work for the Germans? I'll be damned if I do!" he raged. Then, advancing till he was smack up against Syutev, he paled and demanded, "Did you tell the commandant about me? Did you?"

"Take it easy! You're a smart fellow, but you're getting steamed up over nothing. The grain will have to be ground for our people as well as for the Germans. Think of all the soldiers' wives and children in the village. If you refuse, they'll make you work under guard anyway."

"Go away," Father said slowly as he sank onto the bench. He was still shaky from his bout with typhus and this outburst had been too much for him.

Syutev shut the door quietly behind him. The following day two soldiers armed with submachine guns came for Father. They conveyed him to the barn, where he was given a helper to work the engine. It was Victor Kachevsky, the Red Army soldier from our village who had been trying to cross the front lines with his comrades. He, too, had been brought in by an armed escort.

The Germans watched over the two men closely as they worked.

"They stand in back of us all day long," Father complained. "Don't go here, don't do this. I hope they all fry in hell."

Sometimes, however, he did manage to bring home a few handfuls of flour in his pocket. Those days were holidays, for Mother would always make something wonderful with the flour. However, Father was depressed by his new duties as a miller. He cursed the day he had come down with typhus, thus preventing us from leaving the village. He cursed his lame leg which had deferred him from army service in the Civil War, and again in the summer of 1941.

"How will we plough the plot?" Mother wondered aloud.

"We'll have to harness the cow," Father said unhappily.

Zorka, our cow and provider, had somehow survived the winter. The Germans had confiscated most of the hay put away for her for their horses the previous autumn. Now, just as she was beginning to gain strength from the spring grass, she was to be harnessed to a plough!

And so our sweet Zorka was put to the plough.

Her bony, rusty-brown sides trembled violently. She kept turning her head as if to reproach her mistress, and mooing pitifully.

Mother took hold of the bridle, while I threw my weight on the handles.

"Come on, dearie!"

Zorka took one step, then another. The plough moved several inches and the share dug a shallow trench in the soil.

"Come on, Zorka! Come on, sweetie," Mother coaxed. There were tears in her voice as she jerked the bridle, holding out a chunk of bread to the cow. "Come on, good girl."

But Zorka would not budge. She hung her head and stood there.

"Ah-hh, you nazi dog!" I yelled and swung the whip, feeling both sorry for Zorka and bitterly ashamed of myself for having to hit her.

"Don't hit her, Valya! Don't hit her!" Yura hung on my arm like a ton of bricks.

Where had he come from? Mother had foreseen just such a possibility and so, as soon as we had finished cutting the potatoes, she had sent him and Boris to the meadow for sorrel.

Boris was standing right behind Yura, holding a pot of water they had brought for us to drink.

"Go away, Yura, before I hit you!" I shouted.

But he did not move. He threw his arms around Zorka's neck and pressed his cheek against her moist lips. "Why'd you harness her? Why are you torturing her? She won't give any milk if you do."

"How much of her milk do you see?" Mother snapped.

"The Germans take all of it and you know it."

"I'm sorry for Zorka."

"Don't you think I am?" Mother suddenly sank to the ground and burst into tears, unmindful of us. "Yura," she said in a choking voice, "don't you understand that we have to eat? If we don't plant these potatoes we'll die of hunger next winter. Oh, what's the use? You won't understand anyway. But I have to feed all of you even if it kills me."

Yura flushed crimson. His lips trembled.

He and Boris left, but things did not improve. No matter how fervently we urged Zorka on, she would not pull the plough. Finally, in despair, we unharnessed the poor cow and Mother, Zoya and I harnessed ourselves into it. Some German soldiers were passing just then. They stopped to watch, pointing their fingers and laughing convulsively. One of them took out his camera and began snapping pictures of us.

"I don't care what you say, but I won't go on like this," I said to Mother and Zoya. "To have that scum laughing at us...."

We finally took to our spades. Little by little we turned over the soil and planted our plot. We even planted a small patch of rye.

If only we could have known then how much grief the rye was to cause us.

Father was searching for something intently in the yard. He finally came into the dugout carrying the empty wooden box in which he usually kept his nails.

"Look at this. Where could they be?"

He was in dire need of those nails, for the bomb that had spared Devil had dislodged the earth on the roof of our dugout and it now threatened to fall in on us. We were going to put up supports and make a plank ceiling.

No one knew where the nails were and so no one replied. Then Mother said, "Maybe Devil took them."

"What would he need them for? Is this your doing, Yura?" Father demanded.

Yura was sitting on the bed ledge, telling Boris a story, "Yes, I took a few."

"But there's not a single one left!"

Yura shrugged, as if to say: that's not my fault.

Just then Volodya Orlovsky burst into the dugout, shouting, "Hurry up, Yura! There's a whole column of trucks coming down the road. Hurry!"

Yura threw him a warning glance. Volodya stopped short at the threshold. He shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. We could see his pockets were bulging, and there was something tucked into his jacket as well.

"Come over here, sonny," Father said. "Show me what's in your pockets."

Volodya tried to back out, but Father was quicker than he and grabbed hold of him. "Come on, don't be shy."

"Go on and show him," Yura muttered. He was avoiding Father's eyes and sat there, rolling up an end of the straw mattress.

Volodya breathed loudly as he pulled something wrapped in a bit of dirty rag from his pocket. Father shook out the rag. A "porcupine" made of three twisted nails fell into his hand.

"Ah, here they are! And I, old fool that I am, scoured the yard for them. Look what these rascals have done, Valya. They've knocked off the caps and sharpened the points. That took brains. How many do you have?"

Volodya was encouraged by the praise. "Twelve," he said.

"Are they all in your jacket?"

"Yep."

"'Yep!' See how many nails you boys have ruined! How many do you have, son?"

"None. Volodya has all of them."

Father limped over to where Yura was sitting, moved him aside and raised the mattress. "Silly boy. When you've run your bottom through with a nail you'll have nothing to sit on." He pulled about fifteen more "porcupines" from under the mattress.

"They're mines. It's ammunition," Yura muttered. "It's a military secret."

"Yes, I see. And how many trucks have you blown up with your mines?"

"One, so far," Volodya reported. "There was a general in the car, and the rear wheel rolled over the mine and blew out. It sounded just like a cannon. Then the general gave the driver hell."

"So you got a general, did you?" Father mused. "And have you been in the business long?"

"We started way back in the spring, when everything was muddy."

"Mother," Father said gently, "get me the strap and I'll tan both these scoundrels so that no one is offended. Didn't I say these things should be done carefully?"

"Well, we are careful," Yura retorted. "We walk along the road and drop them into the dust when no one's looking. And then we stand off and watch the cars and trucks."

"Careful doesn't mean walking around with bulging pockets. And just think of the nails you've ruined! Where do you expect me to get them nowadays?" Father was speaking very angrily.

I felt sorry for the unlucky saboteurs. "We can straighten the nails out. It won't take long," I said.

But Father was not to be stopped. He was shouting now: "You go throw them all down the outhouse hole, Valya! Right now, hear me? And don't you let this bandit out into the street," he added, pointing at Yura. "Zoya can do some studying with him. I'll bet he's even forgotten the alphabet."

It was useless to argue with Father at times like this. I collected all the boys' ammunition and took it outside.

After Father had left for the mill, Yura came running up to me. "Where are our mines?"

"Down the hole, Yura."

He sighed unhappily.

Towards evening Kachevsky dropped by. "Come on out for a minute, Valya. I want to talk to you."

"Where's Alexei Ivanovich?" Mother asked him.

"He'll be home any minute. I got here first."

We went out to the orchard.

"Listen, have you heard anything about the partisans?" Kachevsky asked in a mysterious whisper.

"Some. I know they're in Byelorussia."

"They say there's a group here, too. Listen, I'm going to look for them tonight. Want to come along?"

"What a question!"

We shook hands and agreed to meet in an hour's time.

We left the village when the sun was still high, so as not to attract the Germans' attention. I warned Mother that I would probably not come back till morning.

We wandered about in the woods all night, ever hopeful of suddenly coming upon a group of partisans.

However, we did not come upon any partisans and returned home feeling crestfallen.

At noon a rumour was passed through the village. Partisans had attacked a bridge near the village of Fomishchino, killing the German guards and burning down the bridge. This was the news I brought to the mill.

Kachevsky cursed. "We're fools, especially me. We were looking in the wrong place. We should have known which way to go."

Fomishchino was on the road to Gzhatsk, while we had spent the night wandering about in the opposite direction, near the front line.

When I returned home Yura could not contain his joy. "Another car got stuck on our mine yesterday," he boasted.

"On which mine?"

"We drop broken glass on the road now."

I felt a pang of worry for him. Then I became restless. Here were two mere babies trying to do their bit, while I, a grown person, was spending my days in the dugout.

"You know what, Yura? You go out to the yard and get your 'porcupines'. They're on the shelf with Dad's tools."

"Oh, Valya! I knew you wouldn't throw them out!" He flung his arms around my neck and hugged me.

"Not a word to Dad about this, hear?"

One day a small, bald, sharp-nosed, harmless-looking German drove up to our plot in a wagon. He was coming from Gzhatsk. He jumped off the high seat of the covered wagon clumsily and began fussing awkwardly with the harness. He finally managed to unharness the big cart horse and led it out of the shafts. His tiny hand slapped the dark rump. Then he lay down on the grass.

Mother was mowing the grass along the edges of a ditch about twenty paces away. This would be hay for Zorka the next winter.

Yura was busy weeding the potatoes. The weeds he pulled up could not be compared with real hay, but after they were dried in the hot sun they were not too bad.

The big horse wandered along the ditch. Trudging heavily on its huge legs, it started across the potato rows to the bright-green patch of rye.

Yura blocked its way, shouting and waving the horse off. It did not even twitch an ear, but kept straight on. Yura jumped out of its way, shouting, "Mamma, he's going to trample the rye!"

Mother looked up, then ran to head the animal off, still holding the scythe she had been using. The horse turned and ambled off slowly. It reached the road, got between the shafts and neighed.

The German had woken up and had probably witnessed the scene. He rose and went over to Mother. He was a head shorter than she, skinny and freckled, and looked up at her, smiling good-naturedly.

Mother smiled back hesitantly.

He struck his chest with his skinny fist and said something. His fingers came to rest on the scythe blade as he indicated that he wanted to hold it.

"Go on, take it. I'll bet you miss a real day's work," Mother said, giving him the scythe. He turned it in his hand to get a good grip on it, for it was obviously too big for him, and suddenly swung it with great force.

"Russische Schwein!" he screamed.

Mother fell to the ground. He had sliced across both her legs. The ground all around her turned red in a second.

Yura ran up to the nazi, grabbed the bottom of his tunic in a wild rage, pulling off a button and some cloth. "You fascist rat!"

The German kicked Yura in the stomach, sending him sprawling. The scythe flashed in the sun again.

"Run! He'll kill you!" Mother screamed at Yura.

"Halt!" someone ordered. The soldier turned and quickly dropped the scythe. A motorcycle and side-car had drawn up by the roadside. An officer wearing eyeglasses was seated in the side-car. The soldier pulled up at attention and saluted. Then he began to babble, pointing now at Yura, now at Mother, who was sitting up, tearing strips off her petticoat to bandage the gaping wounds that were bleeding profusely.

The officer listened to the soldier's explanation haughtily. He then turned to Yura with a small speech. The meaning of it was that "Italiano Soldat" was a fascist, but the German "Soldat" was not a fascist at all but a National-Socialist.

"Undershtand?" he asked Yura impassively. Then, pointing at Mother who was trying to rise but was too weak from the loss of blood, he added, "Mast help Mader. Mast call peoples. Undershtand? Mast run peoples. Schneller!"

He then spoke shortly to the puny soldier who quickly began harnessing his huge horse.

When harvesting time arrived the village elder went round to all the dugouts accompanied by a German soldier from the commandant's office. "We start mowing the wheat tomorrow morning," he'd repeat each time.

Mother was not included, as she was still ailing after being wounded, but Zoya and I were both put to work.

The Germans took all of the collective farm's wheat, every last ear of grain the villagers had put so much hope in. They even distributed the straw to their stables.

The Germans did not overlook our plots, either. We never saw a grain of rye from our patch. It had brought us nothing but grief and blood.

Chapter 16

THE LEAFLET

Of the many difficulties we experienced during the nazi occupation, the most trying was the burden of uncertainty. Cut off as we were from the rest of the country, having no more radios or newspapers, we knew nothing of what was happening on Soviet territory. We did not know where the other front lines were or whether the Allies were helping the Soviet Union or not.

The nazi invaders had been treading the soil of Smolensk Region for over a year. Then February 1943 approached. It was a year of hunger and misfortune.

One day a plane flew over the village. We could tell by the sound of the motor that it was a Soviet plane. It was getting dark, but it was still light enough for us to see something white fall from the plane and flutter down in large slow circles. They were leaflets!

We all wanted to rush out into the street and snatch one, but that was impossible, for the Germans were already running about.

Yura was lucky. He had been skiing outside the village and a gust of wind had blown a leaflet onto the snow-covered meadow. He picked it up, folded it carefully, stuck it in his mitten and raced home.

"Look what I found, Daddy," he said, breathing hard as he entered.

I hung a blanket over the small window, lit the oil lamp and latched the door.

"Read it," Father said to Zoya.

We gathered round the table. Each of us was itching to hold the leaflet, to read the cherished words ourselves.

There was a slogan in bold type across the top. It read: "DEATH TO THE FASCIST INVADERS!" The leaflet carried the news of the crushing defeat sustained by the German armies at Stalingrad.

Zoya read the message in a whisper, but we listened with bated breath, taking in every single word.

"Read it over again, Zoya," Father said. "And slower this time. You rattled it off like a machine gun. This is serious."

We read the leaflet a second and a third time.

"Well, they'll chase the nazis off our land now. They won't be able to hold out now that they have been given the boot at the Volga," Father concluded.

Needless to say, we could not then realise the full importance and historic significance of the Battle of Stalingrad, but we all felt that the victory gained by our forces at the Volga would hasten the final defeat of the nazi hordes.

There was much snow that winter. Blizzards blew over the fields and completely concealed the roads. Telephone wires burst from the weight of the snow.

All the villagers, both young and old, were chased out to clear the roads each day. We were escorted by an armed guard led by a sergeant major. It was rumoured that he was a degraded officer and that he spoke Russian.

"Did you hear the news?" Volodya Belov said when we fell in at the tail end of the column, spades over our shoulders, on our way to the section of the road we were to clear. He was beaming.

"Sure I did."

He shook my hand and said, "Watch me get that nazi's dander up."

Before I had a chance to stop him, he ran out of the column and approached the head of the convoy. "Herr Sergeant Major, may I ask you a question?"

The nazi looked at him in surprise and slowed down.

"May I have a light, Herr Sergeant Major?"

The German unexpectedly stuck his hand into his pocket, pulled out a lighter and held the flame for Volodya.

Volodya lit up. "Thank you. Tell me, Herr Sergeant Major, things were made pretty hot for you at Stalingrad, weren't they?"

The nazi stared at him in disbelief and was about to make Volodya pay for his insolence, but then shrugged wearily and said, "Go back to your place. And I suggest that you keep your mouth shut."

Thus did we learn that the sergeant major did indeed speak Russian well.

Chapter 17

THE FIRE AT THE MILL

"Fire! The school's on fire!"

I ran out of the dugout in response to Yura's cries. Indeed, a column of black smoke was rising over the hill. We ran through the gardens to the school, but it was not burning. The barn which housed the mill was on fire.

"Daddy's there!" Yura cried.

Father was nowhere in sight. Kachevsky was standing by the shed with his back to us, watching indifferently as the flames licked hungrily at the barn, darting upwards towards the roof.

Then we heard the fire engine's siren. At the first sound of it Kachevsky went into the shed and came out with a spade. He began throwing spadefuls of snow into the fire. Father hurried out of the shed and limped off to the well with a bucket.

The German firemen pulled out their hoses and shot streams of water into the flames. They battled the fire for about twenty minutes and then succeeded in putting it out.

The roof had caved in over the charred barn. The small engine, which was Kachevsky's domain, had not been spared. The metal sheathing had buckled and the driving belts had been badly burned.

Then the commandant of the garrison, a tightly-belted heavy-set officer, drove up. His interpreter, a young, short, blond soldier in eyeglasses, and a Finn named Bruno followed.

A few words about Bruno. This seven-foot giant of a man, morose and unsmiling, followed the commandant like a shadow. No one had ever seen them apart. He was the commandant's bodyguard, but had another job as well: he was the official executioner. Whenever the villagers caught sight of Bruno they turned off the road in order to avoid him.

"Father and Kachevsky are in for trouble," I thought.

We stood a way off, in the small crowd of village men and women and our hearts froze with terror at what might happen. Yura clutched my hand. I could feel him shivering.

The commandant leaned his elbow on the radiator and stood there expectantly. The fire chief prodded Father and Kachevsky toward him. They both stared at the ground and said nothing. Bruno stalked over silently and stopped just behind them.

The commandant crashed his fist down on the fender and shrieked something in German.

"Herr Commandant says that the fire here is a political action, a conscious act of sabotage," the interpreter said hastily, "and Herr Commandant is certain that you," here he poked his finger at Father, "and you," his finger now struck Kachevsky's chest, "are helping the partisans, and you should both be shot."

I glanced at Yura. He was as white as a ghost.

"Were you in the Red Army?" the interpreter asked Kachevsky.

"I'm a sick man. I've got stomach trouble. I was deferred," Kachevsky muttered.

"We'll check on that."

Father raised his head and stared at the commandant as he said in a hollow voice: "We're no partisans. Take me, for instance. I've got four children. I wouldn't do anything to leave them fatherless."

The interpreter translated his words and added a few himself. He spoke long and convincingly. The commandant was cooling off visibly.

"Then what started the fire?"

Kachevsky took a step forward. "Come and look for yourself, Sir Herr. There was a stack of straw right near the exhaust pipe. A spark fell onto the straw and set it on fire."

"What idiot put the straw there?"

Kachevsky was silent.

"I asked you a question! Well?"

"Excuse me, Herr Commandant, but your own soldiers brought the straw here in the autumn. I told them then that it was wrong to leave it here, that it might cause a fire. So you see...."

Bruno opened the car door obligingly. The commandant put one foot on the running board and began issuing orders.

"The mill's to be rebuilt within a week," the blond interpreter repeated after him. "And since you're in charge here, Gagarin, you'll be held responsible for everything. You'll pay with your life for the least offence. Remember that the army is short of gasoline, so that you'll be receiving ten litres

for the mill instead of twenty. You are only to work for the German Army. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Father muttered.

"Don't forget, you were lucky this time," the interpreter remarked as he got into the car.

They drove off. The firemen rolled up their hoses and followed. Kachevsky suddenly sat down right in the dirty snow and smiled a helpless, childish smile.

"What's the matter, Victor?" Father said, bending over him.

"My throat is dry." He scooped up a handful of snow and began eating it slowly.

Father rolled and lit a cigarette. Yura ran up to him. He tugged at his sleeve. "Let's go home, Daddy. Hurry. I'm afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of now," Kachevsky said and smiled crookedly. "They won't shoot us till the next offence. Well, that means we start repairs, doesn't it, Alexei Ivanovich?"

"What's the rush?" Father replied.

"Did it really catch fire from a spark?" I asked Kachevsky.

"It was quite a blaze, wasn't it?" he said, ignoring my question. "Give me a pinch of tobacco, Alexei Ivanovich."

A week passed and the second began, but the engine at the mill was silent. Father and Kachevsky procrastinated in every possible way. The commandant sent the blond interpreter over to the mill.

"This is sabotage, Gagarin, and you'll be shot for it. Both you and your helper. By the way, he concealed the fact that he served in the Red Army. You'd better watch your step!"

They had no choice now but to get things going. Some three days later the engine was working again.

One day a saucy young woman from the village named Sanya showed up at the mill. She had been the one to carry out a chicken as an offering when the first Germans had arrived in Klushino. "Alexei Ivanovich," she said to Father, "that small sack of grain by the door is mine. And I want you to know I'm in a hurry."

Father glanced at her darkly. "I can't help you. I've been ordered to mill grain for the army and no one else."

"You're a funny man, Alexei Ivanovich. Don't you know the commandant himself is staying at my house?"

"Well, you're still just a woman and a..." here Father put in a sharp word, "and not a German soldier. I'm carrying out the commandant's orders, if you want to know."

"Well! I know whose side you're on. You're just waiting for the Bolsheviks to come, I know it." She left, slamming the door behind her.

There was trouble ahead. Bruno and a soldier came to the mill for Father and escorted him to the commandant's office. There Bruno, at the personal order of the commandant, gave Father twenty lashes. Yura and I ran there and stood outside in the cold, waiting.

When Father emerged he spat, cursed soundly and, limping worse than ever, headed towards home. He had not noticed us. Yura ran after him. "Did it hurt a lot, Daddy?"

Father put his hand on Yura's shoulder and said in a hollow voice, "It's all right, son. They'll pay for everything."

I walked behind and saw that his hand was shaking and that he was walking with great difficulty. Apparently wanting to conceal his humiliation and hurt he suddenly slowed down and turned to me, saying, "All that talk of Bruno.... Why, he can't even swing a stick properly!" And he spat again.

That night I heard Father say to Mother, "Next time I'll burn it down differently. I just have to pick the right moment."

Chapter 18

BONDAGE

We had been deceived as easily as blind kittens and were now locked in the yard of the Kommandatur, behind a high fence topped with barbed wire. It was like a cage that had no door. Armed German soldiers guarded us.

The previous evening the local policeman had barged into our dugout to say, "You're to be at the Kommandatur at 9 a.m. tomorrow."

"What for?"

"You're going to Gzhatsk. They're rounding up boys your age to clear the snow drifts. There's about three or four days' work there."

Indeed, there had been a bad blizzard the day before and the snow drifts were as high as the cottage roofs. The policeman had sounded sincere, and perhaps he himself had not known the whole truth. I believed him.

I felt a pang of apprehension when they took me through to the yard, where about three dozen boys I knew were standing around uneasily.

After a while the commandant and his blond interpreter came out into the yard. No, they did not promise us rivers of milk and honey in Germany as they had during the early days of the nazi occupation. Then blaring posters, the large headlines in the newspapers the Germans put out and the German hiring agents all promised a great life to anyone who volunteered to go and work in the German Reich.

Now, however, the commandant explained in a few terse sentences that we had all been mobilised to make up a special unit and that this unit, here he called out its long serial number, was to escort a transport of some sort to Germany, and that if any one of us decided to desert on the way every member of our family in Klushino would be shot.

We were kept locked up a day and a night. Our families were allowed to see us the following morning before we left for Gzhatsk. An extra guard was posted around the yard while they were there.

Everyone except Zoya came to see me off. She remained at home, for they were afraid it might be a trap and that she would be taken, too. Father looked haggard. He was silent, unable to speak. Boris stretched his hands out to me. He did not know what it was all about but felt that something was wrong and burst into tears. Mother handed me a small bundle, saying, "There are some buns here, Valya, and some eggs." But I couldn't hold on to it, for I had picked up Yura and was holding him and so the bundle fell. Someone stepped on it by accident. There was a crunching sound of broken eggshells.

Yura pressed hard against me and wailed at the top of his voice: "They'll kill you, Valya! Run away from them! Run away as soon as you can!"

Luckily, no one except myself heard him in this weeping, wailing crowd. Everyone was overcome with his own grief and paid no attention to the others.

I tasted the salt of Yura's tears on my lips and felt his heart pounding wildly against my chest. I must have been crying myself, for everything became blurred. I was holding him like one holds a small child, but he was no baby. He had grown considerably in these two years of wartime. His wrists stuck far out of the sleeves of his old coat. He had not only grown, he had matured, and, unlike Boris, understood what was happening. He would be nine in three days.

On a grey day nine years before, in March 1934, Father and I had gone to the hospital in Gzhatsk. Mother had come out on

the porch of the maternity home dressed in a sheepskin coat and carrying a blue and white bundle.

"That's your new brother," Father had said.

"Let me see him."

Mother, who had got much slimmer and was beaming, now laughed and said, "Aren't you in a hurry! I can't unwrap him here. See how windy it is? He'll catch cold. You'll see all you want of him as soon as we get home."

"Isn't he a dear?" she said at home when she had unwrapped him for me.

I did not reply. To tell the truth, I did not find this red-faced, howling infant attractive. Besides, I was already nine and realised there would be an awful lot of work around the house with a new baby, with Father and Mother away at work all day and me being the nursemaid!

I don't know what kind of a nursemaid I was, but through my care of him, with all the concern and bother it entailed, and despite the difference in our ages, this close bond that tied us grew.

"Run away from them, Valya!"

"I will, Yura, I promise you I will!" I shouted and he alone heard me in the general uproar.

The column was an extended one. We were driven on ahead, with the cattle following. The Germans had confiscated the remaining cows, sheep and pigs the people of Klushino had. Somewhere in the motley herd was our own Zorka. In vain had Mother put away hay for her for the winter, in vain had we all starved. We would have been better off if we had slaughtered the cow.

We were being driven to Gzhatsk. Actually, there was no difference between us and the dumb beasts that plodded on behind.

Someone's mother made her way through the line of armed guards and they set a police dog on her. A boy rushed up to hand something to a youth in the column and was hit with a rifle butt.

Here was our house. I did not want to look that way, for I knew the family was standing at the gate. I knew Mother would run out and follow the column and Father would stand watching us, smoking one cigarette after another.

"Run away from them, Valya," I could hear Yura saying.

I would run away!

When we reached Gzhatsk we were herded into wagons drawn by work horses grown thin during the war years. An armed German guard was appointed to each wagon. Our guard was a fat old glutton named Johann. He would think nothing of eating my tiny ration of ersatz-bread.

Thus did our journey to Germany begin.

While in Gzhatsk I learned that a column of girls had been formed the day after we had left, and that my sister Zoya was one of them.

We stopped in a Byelorussian village for the night three weeks later. I stole Johann's pistol and made for the woods. According to my calculations, Klushino should have been liberated by then and so my family was no longer in danger. After wandering about for several days cold and hungry in this alien part of the country, I came upon a Soviet tank unit.

Chapter 19

A LETTER FROM HOME

I had become a gunner on a T-34 tank.

The shadow now cast by the tank was a mirage, so small that it offered no shelter from the sun which was directly overhead, white-hot and scorching and so unusual for a spring day. I should have gone over to the shade of the birch copse where my comrades were, but I was too tired to move. My arms and legs were as heavy as lead. We had covered a great distance under difficult conditions and had not slept for two days and two nights before racing into the attack that had dislodged the enemy from a large Byelorussian village. Now, having driven the tanks to the copse, we awaited further orders. Since we had not been told to camouflage them, it could only mean that we would soon be on the move again.

Sleep was the one thing I longed for.

I pushed my field cap over my eyes as I stretched out on the grass that smelled of mint and hops. Then I dozed off. My dreams were confused and frightening. First, the glutton Johann chased after me, waving a hand grenade and demanding that I give him back his pistol. He threatened to kill me, but I could not move to save my life.

"Gagarin! Gagarin!" Someone was shaking me. "Sit up and sing, Gagarin, there's a letter for you."

I tore open the white triangle without a stamp. This was my first letter from home, the first news since I had been taken

away under an SS escort. The crooked lines and misspelled words were my father's writing. His learning had come from the school of hard work, not the schoolhouse.

"Good day or good evening, our dear son and Red Army soldier, Valentin," the letter began. After this greeting, which was to be my father's only greeting in all his letters, there followed the village news, which was mostly bad: this family had received notice of a son killed in action; that woman had died the day after Klushino had been liberated, but at least she had lived to see our soldiers retake the village; this one had returned home without a leg.... Uncle Pavel had returned from Mordovia. The collective farm had somehow managed to complete the spring sowing and, as Mother put it, the shoots were "very promising".

Here, at last, were the lines I had sought so eagerly: "Your sister Zoya was as lucky as you and was able to escape from the accursed Germans. Your sister has also become a Red Army soldier and is a veterinary in a cavalry unit."

My heart skipped a beat from happiness. Good for you, Zoya, for running away from them!

"I'm serving in the Red Army, too," Father continued with a note of pride, "but because of my bad leg and my age they've stationed me in Gzhatsk with the hospital maintenance crew. Today is Sunday and your mother and brothers have come to visit me, bringing your long-awaited letter in which you say that you are well and chasing the damned Germans, and we are all writing this answer to you together...."

After the many greetings sent by our relatives and friends, there followed admonitions as to how to avoid being shot and catching cold and how to get along with my comrades and superiors. It was clear as day that Mother had dictated this part of the letter. Then they wished me a speedy return in good health. There followed the closing: "Your loving parents Alexei Ivanovich and Anna Timofeyevna and your brothers Yuri and Boris."

I looked at the date. It had taken nearly two weeks for the letter to reach me. There were other lines on the reverse side of the third sheet of paper. How could I not recognise Yura's printing, with the words leaning every which way like an old fence! This is what he wrote:

"My dear brother Valya,

"Please write and tell me when the war will end. I'm going to school now. Our teacher is Ksenia Gerasimovna. We collect scrap metal for tanks and planes. There's a lot of iron

everyplace. Give the fascists a licking. I miss you very much and don't forget to write and tell me when the war will end.

"Your younger brother Yura."

I read and reread the letter.

"Good news, Gagarin?" the mechanic asked.

"Yes, very. My kid brother wants to know when the war will end."

"Tell him it won't be long now. And don't forget to write that you'll bring Hitler back alive as a special gift."

These were just jokes, naturally, but I did think that Yura was a funny boy to be asking me when the war would end. How could I know? However, it would not be too far off, for we were pursuing the nazis day and night, going so fast we had no time to rest up ourselves. And here was the battalion commander, running towards us right now, with his map-case flapping against his thigh. We'd be off in minutes.

The boys were hurrying out of the copse, buttoning up their shirts on the way.

"To your stations, men!" came the order.

The war separated me from my family for four long years. I was not a witness to the events described in the next two chapters. I learned all of this later from my parents, for in their memory the war still looms large; I learned it from their letters written to me while I was in the army and from Yura's recollections of the time. He was excellent at describing events and people, a quality he had certainly inherited from our mother. I would listen to him and feel that I, too, was back there with him.

Chapter 20

THE SCOUTS

"Tap-tap-tap...." Came a knocking at the window. Father awoke and listened. The knocking was repeated.

"Hear that, Mother? Who could it be?"

"It's them. Who else? They've taken the children. Now they've come for us."

"Tap-tap-tap...."

"It doesn't sound that lordly," Father said. He did not light the wick, but crossed the earthen floor in his bare feet and picked up his axe before opening the door a crack and saying, "Who's there?"

"We're friends, comrade. We're Soviet people."

Father gasped. The axe slipped from his hand.

Two strangers dressed in white winter camouflage smocks over their clothing slipped into the dugout. The sharp beam of a flashlight slipped over the walls and came to rest on the plank bed. It hurt Yura's eyes. He sat up, still dazed with sleep, and rubbed them. The tiny flame of the rag wick flickered.

"We know you're hard up, but you've got visitors all the same. We're Army scouts," the elder of the two, a middle-aged Red Army man said in a deep voice.

The men had thrown off their hoods. Red stars glittered on their fur hats. Mother bustled about, saying, "Oh, we've been waiting for you so long, my dears! I'll cook you some potatoes in no time."

"Just the thing to warm us up, hot potatoes out of the pot," the elder man said approvingly. "And we'll have a chance to talk while we eat."

The second soldier, a short young boy with wide cheekbones, laid his ice-covered submachine gun gently on the plank bed, pulled off his fur mittens made with two fingers for convenience and winked at Yura, saying, "Wake up, fellow! Come on, move in closer. Don't be shy. You haven't seen men like us in a long time, have you?"

"No," Yura said timidly.

"Never mind. You'll soon get used to us. Don't be afraid, we don't bite. Come on closer up."

While the potatoes came to a boil on the little stove and the tea, made of fragrant dried grasses we had gathered in the summer, brewed in the green teapot, Father and the scouts conversed intently at the table. Father held a pencil awkwardly as he drew squares and circles on a piece of paper.

"This is where their tanks are," he said, drawing a square and printing the letter "T" over it. "And this is where the Kommandatur is." He put a "K" over the hateful place. "And over here is where they've camouflaged their long-range guns," and he drew a circle for every gun and printed a "G" over each one.

"Good," the elder soldier said, folding the small sheet of paper and tucking it into some hidden pocket. "Sure you don't want to be our topographer?" he asked Father with a smile.

Mother set the potatoes on the table and said, "I hope you won't mind, but we have no salt. We haven't had any for a year."

"That won't stop us. As they say, it's not the size of the pie that warms your heart, but hospitality."

Father looked upon the man with approval and respect.

Yura finally got up his courage and climbed off the bed ledge, drawing closer to the elder soldier. "I know you," he said.

The man did not seem surprised. "Maybe you do at that. But I doubt whether we've ever met before, my friend."

"Yes, we did. You slaughtered a pig at our farm. And then you gave me a red star for keeps."

The soldier seemed thoughtful. "When did all this happen?"

"When you were running away from the Germans through our village."

That was in '41. And you say I slaughtered a pig? And gave you a star? Hm.... You know, I can't seem to recollect it, son."

"But it was you," Yura insisted. "I remember you. And you had a medal on your chest."

"I have a lot of medals, child. I'm just not wearing them now."

"That's because reconnaissance is a serious thing, and we're on a secret assignment, so we left our medals and papers with our outfit," the young soldier explained and then turned a deep red under the cold stare of his elder comrade.

"Never you mind, son. What's your name? Yura? Come over here, Yura."

Yura climbed into the elder soldier's lap and rubbed his cheek against his cheek. The man was obviously touched. He pulled out his tobacco pouch, rolled a cigarette and handed the pouch to Father, saying, "Light up, friend. It's home-grown choke weed. Don't you fret about my not remembering our meeting, Yura. We were retreating and our hearts were on fire. We were ashamed to look people in the face then. But we've met at a good time now, haven't we?"

They did not stay long. They spoke of the military situation and regretted that the Allies were in no great rush to open up a second front. Mother wept and told them that her two eldest children had been driven off to bondage in Germany. Then Yura joined the conversation, telling them what sort of tanks were stationed in the village, where the heavy ones were and where the light ones were, and what insignia they bore. He also told them the Germans had set up machine guns under the eaves of many huts and marked them.

"You're a fine fellow!" the young scout exclaimed. "As soon as we get back this village we'll sign you up as a scout and put

you on scout's rations according to regulations." The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he blushed again. It was obvious he was not quite used to being on a scout's rations himself.

The soldiers rose, shook hands all around and said, "We'll be seeing you soon."

"When can we really expect you?"

"Get out the yeast. We'll be just in time for raised pancakes," the elder soldier jested. Then he stroked Yura's head and said wistfully, "I've a rascal just like you at home. I haven't seen him for three years. You have a good and trusting heart, son. And you'll get along well with people in this world, being as you are."

The door closed behind them.

The next morning Yura awoke late, something that never happened. He opened his eyes and gazed about unbelievingly. Nothing inside the dugout had changed: the earthen walls, the earthen floor, the small stove made of broken brick and the rough table were all there. "Were they really here, Daddy, or was I dreaming?" he asked.

Father chuckled and replied, "Who knows? Maybe you dreamed about them, and then again, maybe they really did drop in."

"They were here, I know they were!" Yura sang as he hopped off the plank bed and began wrestling with Boris.

The entire day was spent in anxious expectation.

The second night came.

An iron-tipped butt crashed against the flimsy door, ripping off the hook. Father did not even have time to rise from the bed before the German submachine gunners burst into the dugout.

"Partisan! You!"

Mother rushed towards the gun barrel, flinging her arms wide to shield Father, Yura and Boris. "He's no partisan! He's a sick man. Krank. Krank," she added in German.

The Germans began speaking heatedly. Luckily one of them had been a guard at the mill and recognised Father. This saved his life. The soldiers left.

"Are they on the run?" Mother wondered aloud.

Father threw on some clothes and hurried out.

The sky over Gzhatsk was pink. Explosions rent the air. Men with burning torches were running up and down the streets of Klushino. Several cottages in the centre of the village had

already been put to the torch, with showers of sparks issuing from under their thatched roofs. The short bursts of machine-gun fire were like the sound of ripping cloth.

Father pressed close to the corner of our cottage. At that very moment a soldier with a torch ran into him. The soldier grabbed for his gun, but an explosion nearby sent him scurrying off as quickly as he had appeared.

A huge truck moving slowly on caterpillars approached from the direction of Gzhatsk. It stopped for a few moments near our house, spat out a dozen soldiers and moved on. The soldiers seemed strung to it, for they walked on behind it, bending down to bury something in the snow every few feet.

"The rats are mining the road," Father said.

Shells were falling closer and closer. Father stood watching the soldiers. When they had finally finished their murderous mission and driven off, he went back into the dugout and awakened Yura, saying, "Get up son. There's work to be done." He brought out a can of tar, a brush and two sheets of plywood. "Now write this...."

At dawn Soviet troops entered the village. The soldiers spotted the wooden sign sticking out of the snow on a tall post. It read: "Careful—mines!" They turned off the road, advancing along the field instead. The second sign was stuck into the snow at the spot where the Germans had got back into their truck and driven off, some half a kilometre away.

Yura stood by our house, the last one in the village, in the coat he had long since outgrown and waved excitedly to the Soviet soldiers. A young lieutenant in a tightly belted white sheepskin coat ran up to him, saying, "Do you know who wrote the signs, boy?"

"My dad did," Yura replied proudly.

Klushino Village was greeting its liberators. Everyone gathered in the square where once the May Day and November holidays had been celebrated. A tall, stately colonel in a high fur hat made a speech. The people listened closely, then applauded enthusiastically. In conclusion the colonel said, "Would Alexei Ivanovich Gagarin please come forward."

He then embraced our embarrassed father in front of the entire crowd, saying: "A soldier's thanks to you, dear comrade, for preventing a massacre by warning us of mines in the road. Many of our men owe you their lives."

As my parents and brothers were returning home from the meeting, Mother said, "Even the sun seems to be shining differently today. It seems like such a special day." Then she gasped and said, "Why it is! It's your birthday, Yura! You're nine years old today."

"If only Valya and Zoya were here with us," Father said unhappily.

Mother was scrubbing the floors with a vengeance, while the menfolk, Father, Yura and Boris, were busy carrying the family's few remaining belongings from the dugout to the cottage. There was a knock at the door. Then the young scout, the soldier with the wide cheekbones, appeared on the threshold. His submachine gun was slung over his shoulder. He was wearing a padded jacket and a fur hat with ear flaps.

"How do you do!" he said to Mother.

"Come in, dear. Sit down."

"Things will be all right now. I'd like to stay a while, but I've no time," he replied, pulling a tightly packed, knotted knapsack from his pocket. "This is for you. There's salt inside."

"Where's your comrade?" Mother asked apprehensively.

The boy gazed at the floor and said, "He was killed. At dawn today. It was a fluke." He turned towards the door. Just then Yura came in.

"It's you!" Yura cried, throwing his arms around the soldier's neck and sending a pan rolling down the porch steps. "Hello!"

"Hello, fellow," the young soldier replied. He ran his hand over Yura's close-cropped head, then continued on and out, never once turning or replying to Yura's questions.

"Where's his friend, Mamma?"

"He was too busy to come, Yura. He'll drop by another time," Mother said as she fingered the tobacco-studded knapsack helplessly.

Chapter 21

THE WAR RECEDES FROM KLUSHINO

The first four grades were all gathered in one room of the schoolhouse. The girls and boys silently took their places.

"This is how we'll study for the time being," Ksenia Gerasimovna said. "We'll all be together, since there won't be

any other teachers except myself for the time being. Besides, the war is not yet over, and it will be too much to heat the entire schoolhouse."

The children looked at their teacher. She had aged greatly during the two years of war. There were deep lines around her mouth and her hair was peppered with grey.

"Anyone who has a clean notebook or some schoolbooks raise your hand."

Several hands went up.

"Two, four ... six. That's not too many," she said with a sigh.

Volodya Orlovsky rose hesitantly and said, "A soldier gave me a book. Can I use it for studying?"

"Show it to me.'The Infantry Field Manual'. But this isn't a schoolbook, Volodya."

"I've got one like it," Yura said.

"So have I."

"Me, too."

"So do I."

Half the children seemed to have them.

Ksenia Gerasimovna smiled and said, "Well, if that's the case, we'll put the book to use, as they say. I'll give you your assignments from the Manual."

She later asked the children where they had got the books. The answer to the riddle was quite simple. They had come upon a stack of them in the cottage recently occupied by the headquarters of a Soviet unit which had already moved on westward. One of the officers had apparently forgotten to pack the books, and so the boys had appropriated them. Volodya Orlovsky, however, had truly been presented with his copy by the soldier who had been quartered in their house.

That evening Yura sat at the table working on something intently. When Mother peeped over his shoulder she became terrified. Yura was pulling bullets out of their shell casings with a pair of pliers. A mound of empty shells glittered on the table. He worked quickly and deftly, pouring the gunpowder carefully onto a bit of rag.

"You'll get killed! Stop that immediately!"

"No, I won't, Mum. These are plain bullets, not explosive ones. You can't touch an explosive bullet."

"Did you hear me?"

Yura wiped his damp brow and tried to explain patiently: "We're going to use these for arithmetic instead of counters.

Everybody has them. I only had ninety shells, but I need a hundred. Volodya gave me ten more."

Later on he did his homework by the light of the oil lamp. The tip of his tongue darted out of his mouth with the effort as he carefully wrote his large letters across the dim printing on the sheet of newspaper: "The Red Army is the strongest army on earth. We shall win the war!!!" His ink was made from soot. "How d'you like this, Mum?"

Mother peered at the wobbly letters, sighed, then stroked his head and said, "That's fine, son."

"That's not all yet!" he exclaimed and picked up his pen again.

The next day his teacher said, "Yura Gagarin, why did you use three exclamation marks at the end of a sentence?"

Yura rose and replied, "That's so the nazis will be beaten quicker."

She smiled at his reply. "All right. Now come up front and help hang up this map. I'll tell you where the Red Army is beating the enemy right now."

And so it was until the very end of the war: Ksenia Gerasimovna would begin each day with a short report on the situation at the fronts.

The April sun melted the last of the snow and dried the dirty road. The red clay, washed by the spring torrents, appeared on the sides of the hills, and the war-ravaged earth came into view. The craters made by bombs and shells filled with stagnant water; here and there were the mangled remains of once-fearful tanks; the woods were charred and ravaged by bitter fighting. The battles were now being waged far to the West, but the war was still all-too present on the soil of Smolensk Region.

Yura and Mother went to see Father in Gzhatsk nearly every Sunday. No sooner had Klushino been liberated than Father was called up. However, he was promptly put into the hospital, for his leg was much worse and his old ulcer was giving him trouble again. After his condition had improved they stationed him at the hospital as a member of the maintenance crew.

As this was a Saturday, school was let out earlier than usual. Yura would be able to stay over with Father and then return home on Sunday. He walked along alone that day. He had a stick over his shoulder with a bundle tied to it. Inside were some bran buns and boiled potatoes, a treat for his father. It

was fourteen long miles to Gzhatsk. However, when your mind is not busy counting the miles but thinking about interesting things, the journey seems shorter.

There was so much to think about.

A skylark darted out from under the caterpillar track of an overturned army carrier and hung suspended overhead. He wondered whether it could hang in the air from morning till night like that, never stopping to rest or coming down to earth.

A blue snowdrop was growing by the edge of a ditch. He bent down to pick it and noticed that it had come up through the ring of a hand grenade. He tossed the ring away and decided not to pick the flower.

So many things that were strange, sometimes fearsome and difficult to understand appeared that spring.

One day the schoolchildren were helping to sort seeds in the barn. The collective-farm women were sorting seeds nearby them. They were discussing the recent discovery of over a dozen dead nazis of the airport guard near Pochinki, where there had been a German airfield. One of the women recalled that partisans had raided the airfield one night early in the winter during a terrible blizzard. The bodies had been buried under the snow till spring.

Another woman spoke of the mine-thrower some children had found in the woods near Dolginevo with shells in crates nearby. They had slipped one down the barrel, but it had come out the wrong end and had exploded in the village street. What a commotion that started! Luckily, no one was hurt.

There were all kinds of mines, and so many of them in the fields that one had constantly to look underfoot. A Red Army driver's horse had blown up on one outside of Klushino, and the soldier had to be taken to the hospital.

Battles were raging far in the West, but the war still made itself known on the soil of Smolensk Region.

A truck blew its horn. Yura turned and raised his hand.

"Going far, little fellow?" the driver asked, sticking his head out of the cab.

"To see my father in Gzhatsk. He's a soldier."

"Hop in."

It was warm and cozy inside. Too bad the driver hadn't caught up with him sooner, for they had already reached the outskirts of Gzhatsk.

"Is that ER in your bundle?" the driver said.

Yura knew by then that ER stood for "extra rations" in army slang.

"It's buns and potatoes. Want some?"

"No, thanks. But a soldier always appreciates an extra something. When you're advancing they feed you more than you can eat and you're not hungry. If you get stuck at some post for a long time, though, you'll have to tighten your belt."

Yura listened to the driver, nodded in agreement and visualised the way he and Father would sit down at the table, sip scalding water with saccarine tablets and eat the homemade buns as they spoke about things at the collective farm and the situation at the front. "Why didn't Mother come? She's not ill, is she?" Father would ask. "How could she come when they started sowing yesterday?" he'd reply. "Ah, yes. The women'll have a hard time without us...." Yura would solemnly agree. "Yes, there's no tractors, and no horses. They've harnessed themselves into the plough. And that's no way to plough."

Father would sigh. He would hear the unintentional reproach in his son's words for being an able-bodied man, well-shod and clothed, and fed good rations every single day. Such was a woman's lot in wartime: to feed and clothe the menfolk.

"Hey, there, fellow! Out like a light. Wake up, we've arrived. You sure are a sleepy boy," the driver said, shaking Yura. Indeed, he had fallen asleep.

When the joy and excitement of welcoming their liberators had died down somewhat, the women of Klushino were overcome with staggering problems The war had passed through the village like a raging fire. Everything that had been laid away in the corn-bins and granaries or buried in lined pits had been swept clean by the nazi marauders.

The women got together to decide how they would manage and feed their children. News arrived from the district centre that the State had allotted the collective farm seeds for planting. This cheered them immensely. They decided that since their men at the front were giving their all, they would do their share, too, no matter how difficult things were. And thus, until the collective farm's herd returned from Mordovia, they would harness themselves to the ploughs and sow the fields.

And that is what they did, dragging the heavy ploughs themselves from morning till night. They did the sowing by hand, as their grandfathers had done.

The women of Klushino will never forget the harvest of 1943.

They trudged along the furrows slowly, their kerchiefs tied low on their foreheads to protect their faces from the dusty wind. Each woman carried a sieve of grain. The narrow, shallow furrows stretched ahead. Wherever the women passed, sparse handfuls of grain fell into the soil.

The spring days were long, and the field was immense. Their wrists ached, their shoulders, rubbed sore by the straps, were aflame, as four abreast the women pulled the ploughs. A plough lay by the side of the field, its share glittering in the sun. It was resting.

But the women had no time to rest.

"Oh-h-h, I can't go on." Anna Belova sank to the ground, her hands pressed to her heart, her gaping mouth gasping for air.

The women were used to such scenes by now. This was caused by hunger and extreme fatigue and happened every day: now one woman would fall in a furrow, now another.

The team-leader, a stern and demanding woman, said reproachfully, "Anna, didn't I tell you not to put so much grain in your sieve? Who'll take in the harvest if we all kill ourselves?"

When the other women had passed on, she returned to Anna and said, touching her shoulder, "Chew some grain, Annie, and it'll pass. You're too tired and too hungry, that's what. Take a handful and eat it. You have my permission to."

Anna shook her head in fright. If you took a handful for yourself to eat, you'd soon find yourself putting a second handful in your pocket for the children at home. And this at a time when every last grain was accounted for.

"Never mind. I'll get up in a minute. I'm feeling better."

"Good for you," the team-leader said encouragingly and then cursed Hitler's bones as soundly as a man would have done. Her heart bled for every single woman on the team. They alone held the fate of the village in their hands: there would either be a harvest in the fall or all of Klushino would die of starvation.

Anna rose. After a while she caught up with the others.

"Feeling better?" Mother asked.

"I don't really know. I've a strange feeling. I'm so worried. Maybe something's happened to Volodya."

"Don't look for trouble, Anna. Try to think about something else."

"What's the difference whether you say a thing out loud or not? It's on your mind all the same."

"Do you think I have a moment's peace, not knowing where Valya and Zoya are? And the two boys are left alone all day. There's no knowing what trouble they can get into."

"It must be true when they say that women are born to suffer."

The blue field dissolved in the shimmering sunlight. The flax was blooming.

Anna Belova and I sat on her front porch, reminiscing about times long past. She was doing most of the talking, while I listened.

"When you tell the young people nowadays about how we worked after the war they don't believe you. Now machines do all the work. There's more machinery on the farm now than you can count."

Mother's friend had grown old, but she was as spry and vivacious as ever, unable to spend her time as a pensioner without working.

"As soon as the flax ripens I'll help with the pulling. You know, Valya, it really was a premonition I had that day I collapsed in the field. I got a letter soon after. A friend of Volodya's wrote it for him from the hospital, saying my boy was badly wounded. So badly wounded he couldn't even write me himself."

Volodya Belov, my childhood friend and companion, had returned home missing an arm and badly wounded and had died soon after.

"And your dear Yura, too...."

The flax bloomed on under the scorching rays of the sun.

Both Volodya Belov and our Yura had loved the sun and the blossoming fields of flax. We must have both been thinking about this, for she suddenly recalled an old belief, saying, "He who grows up 'midst flax, wear clothes of flax and uses a towel of flax in the mornings will never be ill."

Neither of them had ever been ill. I don't remember Volodya Belov ever complaining of an ache or a pain and know for certain that Yura never had a cold in his life.

Later, as I said goodbye to Volodya's mother, I promised to come and see her again, I set out for the field, where I was to meet old friends, both my own and Yura's. Nina Belova, Zoya Zagryadskaya and Vanya Zernov, the same Vanya with whom Yura had sailed his kites and shared a desk at school, who was now a famed tractor driver, all worked on the state farm.

Klushino is no longer a collective farm. It is now the central division of the Gagarinsky State Farm. Vladimir Verkhileyev, a native of Chuvashia, is the director here. I leafed through a photograph album at his house and came upon a picture of the students of the Mariinsko-Posadsky School of Forestry. I recognised two of the thin youths on the photo. One was Verkhileyev and the other was Andrian Nikolayev, the future cosmonaut. The picture was taken in 1946, the first postwar year. Fifteen years were to elapse until the first manned space flight. Naturally, the two forestry students had no way of knowing then that one of them would fly a ship into outer space and the other would be running a state farm in the home town of the world's first cosmonaut.

PART TWO

LIVING IN GZHATSK

Chapter 1

HOME AGAIN

I have a very clear recollection of the town of Gzhatsk as it was before the war. I recall the neat wooden houses and bright front gardens. In the spring lilac, bird-cherry and white acacia bloomed in every one. As summer progressed great dahlias and holyhocks blossomed under the windows. In the evenings the streets were always lively, with people out walking after the day's work and the air heady with the fragrance of lindens and poplars.

The streets I now walked were so different from the ones I remembered. The charred remains of brick ovens loomed on both sides of the ruined road that was criss-crossed with ugly, water-logged ruts. There were the slanting roofs of dugouts in the back yards with feeble wisps of smoke rising over some. It was late in April and sun shone generously, touching the trees and bushes with the first green of spring. And yet, there lay upon the town a stamp of despondency and dejection, of disorder and desertion.

The train hooted and was off, its wheels clattering along the rails. That was my train, going off into the heart of Russia, taking other demobilised soldiers home.

I hitched up my knapsack and walked on faster. Life had not come to a standstill here, it had not been snuffed out, it was ever-present and making itself known. Here and there I heard the sound of an axe. I saw men in faded army shirts and army pants, working in threes or fours, carrying huge, ringing logs on their shoulders, grunting with the strain. Then I spotted a new house going up, and another. My dear Smolensk forests,

once again—for the *n*th time!—you were giving man a roof over his head and warmth after so many trials and tribulations.

My family was somewheres on Leningradsky Street. Victory Day had been celebrated two years before. I received mail from the family often and thus knew of all the changes that had taken place. After Father had been demobilised he had been asked to stay on in Gzhatsk. He was an experienced carpenter and would help rebuild the town that had been razed by the fascists. Father had dismantled and moved our house from Klushino to Gzhatsk. "Hurry home, Valya," he wrote. "My helpers, your younger brothers, are not strong enough to do a man's work yet, and we have to put the house together again. There's not much I can expect from the womenfolk in this respect, as you well know."

Zoya had returned from the Army. Yura was now in the fourth grade. In every letter he wrote about his school friends and his marks, always speaking enthusiastically of his teacher, Nina Vasilyevna Lebedeva. She was young and a real friend to the children, making them take an interest in their studies. He wrote of the first lesson that year. The teacher brought a book to class. There was a picture of Volodya Ulyanov's report card in it and she had said, "As you see, Lenin received only excellent marks in school. I would so like all of you to try and be like Lenin in every way."

And the children did their best. No one did poorly in any subject.

Boris was now at school, too. Unfortunately, he was having a much harder time with his studies than Yura.

Goodness, how much time had passed since the day I had last seen the family. That had been in March 1943. This was April 1947. Four long years. Forty-nine long months.

Axes chopped away to the right and left of me. Old Gzhatsk, a town founded during the reign of Peter the Great, was being rebuilt again.

I stood looking at him while he stared at me, a broad-browed boy with protruding ears and wearing short pants,torn sandals and long brown cotton stockings rolled above the knees.

We examined each other thus for a minute, perhars even more. Then he mustered up his courage, poked his finger at the buckle of my belt and said, "Where's your rifle?"

"Boris," I said, "don't you know me any more?"

His eyes grew as big as saucers. He took a step backward, then another, turned on his heel and was off.

I was now standing outside our house. It had been reassembled, except for the roof. I knew every log and every knot on every log of the house. I stood there listening to the blood pounding in my head, when suddenly....

"Valya!" Yura rushed to embrace me.

"At least you've recognised me," I said as I hugged him. He was quite a grown boy, and there was strength in his arms. But he seemed rather short. "Why haven't you grown any, Yura?"

He did not take offence. "Eating nettle soup?" he replied.

"Where's the rest of the family?"

Boris had them all on the run by then. Here was Mother, hurrying around the corner of the house, her arms stretched towards me. There was Zoya, right behind her.

"Valya! My boy!"

"Why didn't you let us know you were coming?"

Father pounded me on the back, then kissed my cheek. Another man rounded the corner after him. He was young and dressed in civilian clothes, but you could see by the way he walked that he had but recently been a soldier.

"Dmitry?" I said.

"Yes."

His handshake was firm. He was a strong fellow, this new member of our family and Zoya's husband.

Boris hung behind, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, afraid to come up to me.

"Come on over here," I said. "I've got a present for you."

"What about me?" Yura said, tugging at my sleeve.

"For goodness sake!" Mother sounded exasperated. "Can't you see Valya's had a hard journey and he's tired? And I'm sure he's hungry. Let's sit down and have a bite to eat first."

Mother set the simple table outside in the yard in back of the house. But everything went wrong: first, she couldn't find the forks. Then she kept dropping the dishes.

"Sit down and rest," Zoya said. "I'll get everything ready."

Zoya walked and moved slowly. We brothers would soon be uncles, and there'd be a grandmother and a grandfather in our house.

I untied my knapsack and called the boys over, saying, "You'll have to decide which is for whom yourselves."

Their eyes glittered. It was a nearly impossible choice between a new field cap with a bright Red Army star on it and a genuine, though a badly battered leather map-case. Boris

looked at Yura, as if to say: you're the eldest, you have first choice. But Yura squinted and turned away with feigned indifference. This was too much for Boris. He reached for the field cap.

"Hooray!" Yura shouted. "I knew you'd take that. And I really need a briefcase for my books."

Boris realised that he had chosen badly and pouted. Yura put his arm around Boris' shoulders and spoke into his ear: "I'll let you use my map-case. And you'll let me wear your cap. All right?"

"All right."

Now both boys were pleased.

"Well, soldier, have you forgotten how to swing an axe?" Father asked, glancing at me slyly.

"We'll see," I said and stripped off my shirt. "Where's your tools?" The work-worn handle of the axe fit smoothly into my hand. I could hack away to my heart's content now.

"There's a lot to be done," Father promised. "First, there's the roof. After that we'll get to the yard, and that will take a bit of doing."

"Pile it all on while I feel like it."

"No, today you rest up. That's only right. We'll get to work tomorrow."

Later the three men of the family, Father, Dmitry and I, sat smoking and talking, discussing the events of the past war and our plans for the future. Things would not be easy with such a large family to feed. We talked about what I would do for a living. Meanwhile, Yura and Boris were crawling up and down the ditches, running from house to house, firing at the sight of each other.

"Bang! Bang!"

"Rat-tat-tat!"

Yura had the map-case slung over his shoulder. Boris wore his new field cap. Each was armed with a wooden make-believe machine gun.

"Rat-tat-tat!"

"Bang! Bang!"

"I killed you first!"

"I got you with my hand grenade long ago."

The sun would soon be setting. All was peace and quiet in the world, with only the thud of axes to break the silence. These two, however, were in the midst of a regular war.

Chapter 2

MY HELPERS

May brought many joys. We finally had a roof over our heads, having moved into our house again. It was rather cramped, and there would soon be a new baby, but, as they say, the more the merrier. No one complained. The school year had ended with Boris having been promoted to the next grade and Yura taking his first exams. He proudly announced that he was now a fifth-grader. I had taken a job at the district telephone office as a line man and was getting a "fixed salary" as Father put it. In those difficult days that meant a lot. All the adults of the family except Mother, who took care of the household, now held jobs.

I had very little time left for my brothers now and would rarely find them at home when I returned from work in the evenings. Since they had no more lessons to worry about, they spent all their free time at the river, coming home late in the evening, wolfing down their supper and falling asleep in seconds. We had only our Sundays to spend together.

My brothers soon got tired of going to the river every day. I noticed this and asked them whether they'd like to come along with me to check the lines. They were quite excited about the prospect of being allowed to put on my climbing irons and climb a telephone pole.

We set out, with Yura carrying my broad leather electrician's belt and Boris carrying the irons. We had quite a way to go, for a line had broken six kilometres from Gzhatsk. We should have had a lift to the place, but there were still very few vehicles in the district and all the line men walked.

There had been a shower that morning. The fields seemed damp and the young shoots were a brighter green than ever. The endless trilling of a skylark had accompanied us from town.

Soon Boris was lagging behind.

"Let me carry the irons," I said.

He looked at Yura and shook his head. "I'll carry them myself. Do we have far to go?"

"No."

Yura was incapable of walking along serenely. He would dash on ahead, racing after a bright butterfly, or dart into a

ditch and come running back with a bunch of wild flowers. Suddenly he stopped, bent over, picked something and held it behind his back. When Boris was abreast of him he said, "Shut your eyes. I'll show you a trick."

Boris looked at him suspiciously, but Yura seemed serious and so he shut his eyes obediently.

"One-two-three!" Yura said. "Now say 'ah-h-h'."

"A-h-h."

"Whooo!" A cloud of white fluff from a dandelion flew into Boris' open mouth. This was so unfair that Boris swung the irons at Yura. Yura darted out of reach and raced on ahead.

A battered truck was coming slowly towards us, wheezing mightily on the rise. There was a soldier armed with a carabine beside the driver. The tailgate was down. Inside the truck was an airplane. Its mangled tail pointed skywards, and its wings were lopped off.

"Look, they're taking a nazi plane to be smelted."

"It's a Messerschmidt," Yura said.

I chuckled. "You're quite an expert, aren't you? What other planes do you know?"

"I know all our planes, and all the German planes," he said quickly. "The Germans had Fokke-Wolfs, Heinkels and Junkers. We had YAKs, LAGGs, MIGs, ILs and TBs. Those were the bombers. Then there were IL fighter planes. I know the designers, too: Lavochkin, Mikoyan, Ilyushin and Tupolev."

"There were Hurricanes, too. You forgot about them," I teased.

He pondered over this for a moment. "That must be an American or British plane. We don't have any like that, and the Germans didn't, either. I'll find out about it."

"What do you mean there aren't any like that when the Air Force used them?"

He gazed after the departing truck for a long while and then said sadly, "You treat me just like a baby. But I'm not any more, you know."

"Of course you're not. I'll bet Dad's trousers are too short for you now."

He fell silent again and was silent for a long while. When he finally spoke I could see he was hurt.

"You can laugh if you want to. But if not for the war, I'd have been in the seventh grade instead of the fifth."

I felt ashamed. "Come off it, Yura. You're not the only one. I know fellows who fought all through the war and were

decorated many times. Now they've gone back to school. And I think that most of the kids in your class are your age and should have been in the seventh grade, too, but they're in the fifth just like you. As for the Hurricane, you're right, it is a British fighter plane."

I wanted to cheer Yura up, but was unsuccessful. No longer did he dash on ahead, dart into the ditches for flowers or tease Boris. He walked on beside me in silence, keeping in step with me. I cursed myself for having hurt his pride and having given him a chance to express something he had probably kept hidden deep in his heart. Indeed, I would have to get used to the fact that Yura was no longer a baby.

I climbed a pole and strung out the wire. The horizon escaped, it moved off, and from on high I had a wonderful view of the surrounding villages with the blue edge of the forest on one side and the glittering ribbon of the Gzhat River on the other. I had a feeling of spaciousness, of freedom and breathed deeply.

When I looked down I saw that the boys had pulled off their shirts and were getting a tan, each in his own way. Boris had stretched out on the grass with his back to the sun. His arms were skinny and his shoulder-blades stuck out. The food of 1947 would not make a child plump.

Yura could not sit still. He was racing around like mad, always finding something of interest and something to do. "Let's go pick sorrel," he said to Boris. "I've found a place that's full of it."

"Go 'way. Can't you see I'm busy? I'm getting a tan."

"Stupid! Don't you know you get the best tan when you're in motion? I'll go and pick sorrel, and Mamma will make us soup, but you won't even get a spoonful. You'll be sorry!"

"Valya!" Boris shouted up at me. "Is it true that if you look at the sky from a telephone pole you can see the stars?"

"At night?"

"No, now."

I threw back my head and looked into the sky. Fluffy wisps of clouds floated by. Above was a clear blue vastness, and not a star to be seen. "I can't see any stars," I called back.

Yura sat down beside Boris and tried to explain matters. "You can't see the stars from a telephone pole in the daytime. But if you look down a deep well you can. I read about it. When we go back to Klushino we'll look down our well."

He often spoke of our native village.

We sat around on the grass afterwards eating our lunch.

It consisted of three tiny boiled potatoes apiece and a thin slice of bread with salt on it. Not much of a lunch, considering that the hours spent in the fresh air had given us voracious appetites. Then Yura shook the sorrel from his shirt. He had knotted the sleeves and collar to make a sack. "Help yourselves. I'll pick some more to take home."

"I knew you'd give it to us," Boris said, puckering up his face with pleasure.

This first "expedition" was to be followed by many more when my brothers tagged along.

Early that spring Yura had nailed three bird houses he had made himself to three long poles, setting them up in the new orchard. The one-year-old switches of apple trees had only put out a few leaves, and this worried Father. Now the fancy bird houses awaited the first starlings. They soon came flying home from the South and appreciated Yura's handiwork, for starling families occupied all three houses. Some while later we heard fledglings peeping and chirping inside.

Early each morning Yura would come out onto the porch to listen to them. He could stand there for an hour or even two, undressed, unwashed and having gone without breakfast, listening to the boisterous starlings singing their many songs.

One morning I was awakened by my brother's shouts. A loud clattering followed. I jumped out of bed and raced outside. Yura had good cause to be worried. Our thief of a cat had climbed one of the poles, reached the bird house, and now had its paw inside the hole. Yura screamed at the cat, he waved and clapped, then grabbed an empty pail and began beating it with a stick. Tobik, our mongrel that Yura had brought up, was barking wildly. The grey thief could not have cared less. The cat pulled a fledgling out coolly and dropped it to the ground.

Yura rushed over, loosing the pail in his haste and then tripping over it and falling. Meanwhile, the obnoxious cat slid easily down the pole, snatched the fledgling and was gone. Yura was close to tears.

"So what if the cat ate the starling? She's got to eat, too," Boris said philosophically at breakfast.

"Are you looking for trouble? I'll bash you one real quick, you know," Yura threatened and Boris said no more, burying his face in his bowl.

I wondered whether Yura really resorted to this method in bringing up his younger brother.

Yura was upset the whole day. He even refused to accompany me.

"I'll guard the birds," he said. As I was leaving, he ran up and asked me to bring home a roll of wire. I promised to, hoping that would cheer him up.

I brought the wire home that evening. Yura took the hammer and pliers and went outside. I followed. He had had a bright idea. He strung the wire with a brass ring slipped onto it between two of the poles. Then he tied a rope to the wire and attached the other end to Tobik's collar.

"No cat will ever stick its head in here, now," Yura said.

Indeed, Tobik made our grey cat and every other cat in the vicinity afraid to come near the bird houses. We were having supper one evening when Tobik began barking excitedly. Yura dashed outside, returning about ten minutes later. He was smiling and looking pleased. A fledgling had fallen out of the bird house, landing right under Tobik's nose. Then Tobik had barked to summon him.

"Where's the bird now?" Boris asked.

"In the bird house. Where else would it be?" Yura said, resuming his place at the table.

This desire to always help the weak was a quality he had possessed since he had been very little.

The boys were responsible for the garden in the spring. We adults spread fertiliser on the soil and turned it over, made the beds and planted the seeds. Everything else was their domain. They cared for the plants, weeding and watering them.

There were times when they'd be out playing and I'd take the watering can and go over to the rows. The moment they'd spot me they'd begin to shout: "Why'd you do that? We know it's our job. We didn't ask you to."

In the end Yura took to hiding the watering can so expertly that even Father, who knew every square inch of the yard, couldn't find it. Mother, of course, knew all of Yura's hiding places, for he never had any secrets from her, but she always kept her children's secrets.

Yura and Boris had their own rows, too. These were planted with green peas, chickpeas, pole beans and red poppies. We did not dare touch these rows. They grew the green peas and chickpeas as a treat, but the pole beans and poppies were "for show". Yura would stick poles along the row and the beans would climb them. Then he would train them around the small

apple trees and in the middle of the summer they would light up with tiny red flame-like flowers. From a distance no one would ever guess they were pole beans in blossom.

"Come and see how pretty they are," Yura would say, leading me out to the garden. "They're just like tiny lanterns on a New Year's tree."

Mother would never have to remind them to do the weeding. On the contrary, many were the days when she'd see them crawling about between the rows all morning. She'd call, "That's enough for today, boys! Go for a walk, or go to the river for a swim."

"Wait a bit, Ma," Yura would call back. "We'll stop as soon as we're through here. The water's warmer in the evening anyway."

The garden was not simply their job, it was a fascinating game they had invented. In this game each weed was the enemy, a "nazi" or a "Whiteguard" that had to be beheaded. And so the two generals (Yura was always Chapayev and Boris was Budenny) would lead their armies against the foe. Or else two flyers, Chkalov and Kozhedub, would be bringing down nazi planes in an imaginary sky among the rows. In Yura's fertile imagination Chkalov, who had been killed in a crash while testing a plane before the war, had definitely taken part in it and had won every single dogfight.

Perhaps this lively game helped the boys to weather the difficult and extremely hungry summer of 1947.

One Saturday the boys said, "Tomorrow's Sunday. Let's go mushroom picking."

"We didn't find any last time and we won't this time, either. People'll just make fun of us," I replied.

Actually, it wouldn't have been a bad idea to go off to the woods, with each of us bringing back a basket of mushrooms. It would even be nice to just spend the day wandering among the firs and birches. But I had promised my friends that on Sunday I'd join them. We were going to a nearby village where they knew some girls. There would be a sort of a party and dancing to an accordion.

My brothers were excited at the prospect of picking mushrooms. They reminded me of the recent rain that had surely brought out a good crop.

Mother was on my side. "Why don't you leave him alone? Besides, there are still mines in the woods. You might trip over one."

"This isn't the first time we're going," Yura objected.

"We're not afraid of mines. A soldier's coming along with us," Boris added, pouring oil on the fire.

This obvious flattery disarmed me. I hemmed and hawed and finally gave in. "All right. Get the baskets out. We might as well go."

"I'll have time to go to the party," I decided. "I'll be just in time." I left for work. However, I was not destined to go mushrooming with my brothers the next day or to a party in the evening.

I can't be sure whether I imagined it or whether the telephone pole actually moved when I climbed to the very top. I thought it might have been a gust of wind, or perhaps the sensation was caused by the height. But what if.... "You're rotting, old fellow. Time for you to retire," I said, slapping the top of the pole in a friendly way. I knew it might be dangerous to stay up there too long. I'd slide down as soon as I cut the wires.

I pulled out my wire-cutters, severed all the wires and quickly began descending. That was when the pole came crashing down. All I heard was a faint crack. I tried to jump clear, but was too late.

The sun-baked earth was packed hard. I fell awkwardly on my side with the pole coming down on my legs. Then I blacked out.

As I lay in the hospital, I realised that I never should have climbed that pole. The bottom had rotted long ago and it had been supported by the taut wires which acted like cables. It had stood only until I severed them.

It was all very clear now. There is good reason why they say hindsight is better than foresight. Indeed, I could have easily checked the pole before climbing it.

The sun beat down mercilessly that day. Later, in the hospital, I was told that I had lain unconscious under its scorching rays for too long and that first aid had come too late. The result of it was that I now had gangrene.

"We'll have to amputate your leg," the woman surgeon said in a voice that ruled out all objection.

How bitter those words sounded! I had seen action in a tank turret for over two years. Bullets and shells had spared me. I recalled the time our tank had gone right into a mine field. It would be silly to say I wasn't scared stiff. But we got out of there unscathed.

And now this!

One has a lot of time to think in a hospital. I lay there, my whole being attuned to the sharp, intractable pain in my leg, a pain that did not cease for a moment, and thought about various things. My bed was by the open window. A breeze wafted in and sun-spots flitted across the white walls, the sheet that covered me and my eyes, making me squint. Mother had just been to see me, bringing me boiled eggs and some white bread, a rare treat in those days. The food now lay on the night-table, covered by a sheet of newspaper.

"Get well soon, dear. Try to get out of here soon," she said.

I'd be only too glad to do that.

"Why don't you try the eggs? Food is a help in any sickness."

I'd have eaten them, but I knew they'd get stuck in my throat.

It was strange to realise that as long as a person was well and about he never stopped to think about sickness, strolling by a hospital whose walls concealed illness, suffering and grief.

I had my share and more of illness now.

Someone coughed softly, interrupting my trend of thought. I turned to the window and saw a closely-cropped blond head.

"Hi, Valya!"

Relatives were not allowed to visit every day, but this would not stop Yura. Making sure there was no one about in the ward except me, he swung his legs over the sill and jumped down onto the floor in his bare feet. He came to sit on the edge of my bed, perching there precariously, seemingly afraid to breathe lest he cause me discomfort.

"How are things?" he asked in a man-to-man voice.

I smiled crookedly. "They couldn't be worse. They're going to cut off my leg."

He sighed convulsively. "You know, Valya, lots of people have only one leg. You won't be able to climb telephone poles any more, but you can learn to do something else."

I said nothing, for I was afraid to lose control of myself. Besides, what was there to say? I heard the same placating words from Dr. Tolstikova, the surgeon who was going to make me one-legged, every single day. These words that were such a sweet lie made me feel terribly sorry for myself. They filled me with self-pity. Ah, dear people, what are you talking about? Don't you know I'm only twenty-one?

"You know, I've just read a book about a flyer. It's a swell book. He lost both his legs, but he kept on fighting and flying his fighter plane. He became a Hero of the Soviet Union, that's what. His name's Meresyev."

"That's either a pack of lies or else you've all mixed up. No pilot could fly a fighter plane without his feet. I was in the war and I saw enough to know that."

"It's not a lie. It's the truth. I've got the book here." He pulled a tattered, dog-eared copy of Boris Polevoi's book *A Story About a Real Man* from inside his shirt. "Here. Read it and see for yourself."

"I'd have appreciated it more if you'd asked Dad for some tobacco, Yura. Be sure to bring me some next time. I'm dying for a smoke."

"All right."

He left as he had come, through the window. The book now lay on the night-table beside me. To tell the truth, I had no desire to read it.

"Well, Valentin?"

"No. I won't let you amputate it."

"This may lead to very bad complications."

The doctor was trying to convince me, peppering her sentences with strange long words I'd never heard before. Her voice was soft and coaxing. It made me feel as if I was drifting away in its folds. Although I only understood a fraction of what she was saying, I sensed I might give in and agree. To preclude this I kept repeating over and over again, "It's no use. I'll never agree."

She shook her head sadly. I could see there was no hope for me, but I kept on mumbling, "I won't let you. I'd rather die."

"All right. We'll see what can be done." The surgeon left. A short while later I was wheeled into the operating room.

They put me to sleep. I came to on the operating table and found myself staring up at the white ceiling. I could not move. There was a weight attached to my foot. But, thank goodness, it was still there. They had not amputated it!

I spent the next five months stretched out with a weight attached to my foot. Then another month without the weight. Six months in all.

It was winter when I set off for home on my new crutches. I was not used to them and had a very hard time trying to keep from slipping on the icy, rutted road. "It's only for a short while. I'll soon be rid of them," I said to myself.

There was a grand reunion with the boys at home, and there was mushroom soup for dinner.

"What kind of work do you think you'll be able to do?" Father asked.

"I've been thinking about being a truck driver. I know all about motors, and I learned to drive in the army. I just have to get rid of my crutches and get a driver's license. That won't be any trouble."

"It's hard at first," Yura said.

"What about Meresyev?" I replied and smiled. "Here, take the book back to the library. It's long overdue."

"So what? I told them who it was for."

Chapter 3

YURA IS A FIFTH-GRADER

Yura started the fifth grade in a new school. Late one afternoon he said, "Come on, Valya, I want to show you my school."

"It's too far away. I won't make it."

"Come on. I'll help you. You can lean on me."

He finally talked me into going. After some time and much hobbling I reached the schoolhouse. It wasn't much to look at, just a simple two-storey wooden building. It was rather dark in the corridors. The plaque on one of the doors read: "5A".

"This is my class."

Yura opened the door. I entered the rather small and rather gloomy-looking room. I was struck by the sight of it. The classroom did not resemble the usual type of classroom. I had gone to school for seven years in Klushino. My desk had been an ordinary school desk with a hinged top on which I had carved my name on the inside. Here, however, there were two rows of large, rough-hewn tables that seemed to have been knocked together any old way.

"Sit down, Valya," Yura said, offering me the teacher's chair. When I had made myself comfortable, with my lame leg stuck out straight ahead of me, he explained that five or six pupils sat at each table, and if the teacher called on someone in the middle he would simply duck under the table and go up to the board.

"How's that?" he asked and beamed.

"That's fine. But I still think it's more comfortable to sit at a desk."

"It's more fun this way. And it's warmer, too."

He was certainly right about that. It was bitter cold in the classroom. I had got hot from the effort of walking so far on my crutches and had not felt the cold at first. After sitting there a while I noticed the hoarfrost in the corners and felt the draft on my feet. My fingers were slowly becoming numb.

I wondered how the children could take five and six hours of such cold every day.

"We don't take off our coats, or our hats when it's really cold," Yura said, guessing my thoughts.

The fifth grade was a landmark in the life of every pupil at the time. It was the dividing line between primary school where they had had one teacher for all their subjects and secondary school, where each teacher taught a given subject. The subjects were new and more difficult. too. In my opinion, it was also a dividing line between childhood and youth, for the boys and girls of the fifth grade acquired a new appreciation of life and the world around them, a more serious outlook than before. There was good reason why children of this age caused their parents and teachers so much trouble and anxiety.

I know that Yura learned a lot in the fifth and sixth grades of the Gzhatsk school, which he attended from 1947 to 1949. These were also the last two years he was to spend at home.

I shall try to reconsruct them in as great detail as possible.

The fifth-graders were eligible to join the Young Pioneer organisation. Yura was excited when he came home from school that day. "We'll have assembly tomorrow, and they'll tie our red ties," he announced. "Let's go and buy me a tie, Valya."

"All right."

We went to every single shop in town, but could not find a single Young Pioneer's tie on sale. Moreover, there wasn't even any red cotton cloth in the shops from which Mother could make Yura a tie. It was understandable, for these were very hard times just after the war.

"That's it, Yura. There's nowhere else to look," I said when the door of the last shop creaked mournfully shut behind us.

He stood there before me in his unbuttoned coat and fur hat, one flap of which was up and the other lowered over his left cheek. Sticky, helpless snowflakes were drifting down from the grey sky. Yura seemed the embodiment of helplessness, confusion and despair.

"There's no place else to go, Yura," I repeated.

"What'll I do?" he muttered, kicking at the snow with the toe of his felt boot.

"Maybe they'll give you red ties in school. Or maybe you can bring in the money and somebody can go to Smolensk and buy them for the whole class. They surely have them there."

"They told everyone to bring a tie to school. Everyone has one except me."

"You should have thought of it sooner."

Mother was as upset as Yura. "This is awful," she said. "What'll we do now?"

Father was also at a loss, but he was more optimistic than we. "Don't worry, Yura. Next week I'll be going to Smolensk. The main thing is to know in your heart that you're a Young Pioneer."

"But they're going to tie our ties tomorrow!" Yura shouted in despair. "I'll be the only one without a tie!"

"I don't agree with you, Alexei," Mother said. "Yura, dear, you go to bed and have a clear head for the morning. We'll think of something."

I, too, felt a ray of hope at her words, for we all knew that Mother never made false promises.

As soon as the boys were finally asleep, Mother put her sewing machine on the table. "Isn't the day long enough?" Father grumbled.

"No, it's not," she replied. Then, with a sigh, she opened her little old chest that had survived a revolution and two wars, her girlhood and youth. She rummaged about in it and came up with something wrapped in a yellowed sheet of newspaper that had been lying on the very bottom. When she unwrapped it we saw a crimson high-necked shirt.

"Are you mad?" Father said in a frightened voice. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's for a good cause, Alexei. I wonder where my scissors are?"

Long, long ago, before the war, when I was Yura's age or even younger, I had seen this shirt. I had only seen it once in my whole life. I knew it was the only memento Mother had of her father, our grandfather Timofei Matveyev, a worker of the Putilov Plant in St. Petersburg.

Although I was born after my grandfather's death and had never seen him, I knew all about him. I was not the only one

who knew his life story by heart, for in the long winter evenings Mother had often told us about her father.

At the age of ten Timofei Matveyev had left his native village in Smolensk Region and gone to St. Petersburg to earn his living. He was a bold, bright boy. During the following few years he worked as a messenger boy, a delivery boy and a worker in a nailery shop. Having gained some experience in the capital and matured he found a job at the Putilov Plant in 1892. In time he became a highly-skilled metalworker.

Grandfather Timofei had a large family. However, his skilled job did not bring in much money and they lived very frugally, trying to make ends meet. He learned to read and write in the city and with this knowledge came the realisation of how unjust society was. He came into contact with the revolutionaries, taking part in the revolutionary events of 1905. On January 9, 1905, Bloody Sunday, he was one of the petitioners marching towards the tsar's palace.

"If only you knew how he wept and cursed Father Gapon when he came running home from that terrible demonstration!" Mother said. "You can't imagine how much workers' blood was shed on that Sunday.

"There was a ditch in back of our house for the waste water from the bath-house. Well, the water ran red that day."

Timofei wept for his fallen comrades, the murdered workers. He also wept from bitterness at their having been so naive and trusting the traitor, Father Gapon. Mother had heard the story from her elder sister Maria.

After that a foreman faithful to the plant owners and prodded by the police spies saw to it that a billet fell on Grandfather as he passed. It maimed him for life.

Mother's elder brother Sergei had followed in their father's footsteps. He, too, was a factory worker in St. Petersburg. At the age of seventeen he was put on the blacklist for going on strike. The gendarmes often raided the Matveyev apartment, searching for banned revolutionary literature. After the revolution Sergei became a commissar in a Red Army unit and saw action on various fronts. He took part in putting down the kulak uprising in Gzhatsk. He died of typhus in the prime of life in 1922.

All this came back to me when I saw Mother take out Grandfather's red shirt. I remembered Mother telling us that he had only worn it on special occasions, when the workers had gathered in secret to celebrate May Day.

"I think you're making a mistake," Father said.

"No, I'm not," she replied, taking up her shears.

Soon a three-cornered crimson tie was placed on the chair over Yura's neatly folded white shirt.

"Hooray! Thank you, Mamma!" Yura cried the next morning and kissed and hugged her.

"Wear it in good health, son."

Yura never guessed how precious the tie was. He never dreamed that Mother had sacrificed her only remembrance of her father. None of us said a word about it.

However, I was forced to tell him a week after he was made a Young Pioneer. He came running home from school that day, tossed his books onto the bench and shouted, "We've been given new ties, Valya! Real ones!"

Luckily, I was home alone.

"Look!" he said, unbuttoning his coat. "It's real silk!"

"What have you done!"

My expression and shout frightened him. He cooled off immediately. "Nothing."

"Do you know what Mother used to make your tie? Grandfather Timofei's red shirt!" I wanted to tell him about it, but had no chance to, for he was out of the house and down the street, running back to school. He soon returned wearing his sateen tie.

Olga Stepanovna Rayevskaya, the teacher of grammar and literature and Yura's home teacher, cherished an album in which she kept compositions by the pupils of "5A" written during 1947 and 1948. She later presented the album to the Gzhatsk local lore museum. The title painted carefully on the album cover reads: "My Favourite Book".

It is interesting to note the books the girls and boys of Yura's class named as their favourite ones.

The first composition in the album is by Tamara Shirokikh. Her favourite book was A. Fadeyev's *The Young Guard.*

Sasha Teplova wrote enthusiastically of a book about Sergei Shershavin, Hero of the Soviet Union, and of his brave deeds. Tonya Durasova was greatly impressed by Yevgeny Rys' book *A Girl Searches for Her Father.* Victor Mukhin liked Lagin's *Battleship "Anyuta"* and the adventures of its brave crew. Valya Petrov, Yura's best friend at school, chose Likstanov's *Adventures of a Ship's Boy.* Anya Konoplyova wrote of Yelena Ilyina's *The Fourth Peak.*

The young teen-agers who had lived through the war and the difficult years of nazi occupation all chose books about the war as their favourites. Perhaps this was because the courageous heroes were so utterly devoted to their country. The children admired these heroes and tried to be like them.

Yura's composition was removed from the album and placed in a glass case in the museum. In it Yura wrote of the heroes of I. Vsevolozhsky's book *At Sea,* the sailors of the Black Sea Fleet who sank a nazi submarine, later escaped from their fascist captors and fought bravely with a partisan unit. They were the first men to fight their way back into Sevastopol on the cutter *Night Dolphin.*

It is a rather naive composition. I think much more is expected of fifth-graders nowadays. However, the point a fifth-grader named Yura Gagarin felt was most important was that the heroes of the book "did not become discouraged, but continued fighting" when the odds against them were so great.

Books were especially respected in our family. If Father was more interested in historical plots and the life of Peter the Great, Mother read anything that came to hand: novels, short stories and poetry. Whenever she had a free moment she would sit down with a book. Unfortunately, there were so few free hours of relaxation in her life. Her work on the collective farm and now her household tasks took up most of her time. "The days are simply too short," she would say with a sigh.

Yura had his parents' example to follow, and there was Zoya who was forever bringing new books home from the library. He read avidly from the time he was very young and was probably the most addicted to books in our family.

When Yura was still in primary school he "gobbled up" every book that came his way. There were the slim volumes of children's books; there were the heavy volumes of "adult" literature; there were the old Russian folk tales which he had loved since he was a baby, for Mother was a great story-teller.

His teacher, Olga Stepanovna Rayevskaya, had taught Yura to love the Russian language and to respect books. I recall how upset my brother was when she told the class about the duel that ended the life of the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

During that autumn and winter of 1947 Pushkin entered our home for good. It all began with his stories in rhyme: *The Fisherman and the Goldfish, The Tale of the Golden Cockerel* and

The Tale of Tsar Saltan. I recall those long winter evenings. The blizzard howled outside, but it was cozy and warm in our cottage with the brick oven blazing hot. The family would be gathered round as Yura read Pushkin's poems aloud.

These were the troubled times and strained,
Veiled by the smoke of battles crushing,
When Peter's genius and young Russia
A true maturity attained.

He recited in a loud, expressive voice. His one shortcoming was his unnecessary haste. Father would cup a hand over his ear, for he had become somewhat hard of hearing after his bout of typhus, and would nod in rhythm to the lines. When Yura stopped to catch his breath, Father said, "For God's sake, don't rattle like that! That's a poem about Peter the Great, you know!" However, he never interrupted Yura.

Mother seemed to be embroidering, but at closer inspection we'd see that the cloth was lying in her lap, forgotten, as she listened intently. Yura loved Pushkin's poetry.

I think that his passion for it and interest in the poet's life was not accidental. Yura was a very vivacious person, and Pushkin's verse, so full of vitality, was kindred to his soul.

We also read Krylov's fables and the short stories of Maxim Gorky aloud in the evenings.

Beginning with that autumn Yura's map-case schoolbag was forever filled with the works of Lermontov, Tolstoy, Nekrasov and Gaidar. I believe that his taste in literature was being formed that year. Yura always took part in the readers' conferences Olga Stepanovna held. At her suggestion he started a diary in which he recorded his opinion of the books he had read. He also learned a great many poems by heart.

One day Yura brought home a trumpet belonging to the school band. It was old and battered, and the shine had all come off the mouthpiece.

While my brother was shedding his school clothes, a pair of neatly-ironed black trousers and a white shirt, and changing to his old pants, which were getting too short for him, and a striped shirt, I examined the trumpet. Someone had scratched "Lenny loves Sima. 1937" on its brass side.

"I'm going to play a solo, Valya," he said when he had changed.

I glanced worriedly at the cradle in which Tamara, Zoya's little daughter, was blissfully asleep.

"Don't worry, it won't be loud." He reached for the trumpet, took a deep breath and.... It is difficult to describe the blast that issued forth.

I put my hands to my ears. Tamara awoke with a start and began to cry. Father limped in from the garden, stopped at the threshold and stared. Yura's cheeks were puffed out. He was crimson from the effort and kept blowing as hard as he could, as if he had lost the ability to hear himself.

"It's taps for us," Father said glumly. "He's a regular musician!"

Yura stopped blowing, caught his breath and glanced at Father innocently. "That sounded all right, didn't it?"

"Couldn't have been better. Hear the baby screaming? That means she likes it so much she can't wait for you to start again."

"With pleasure," he said and raised the trumpet to his lips.

Father winked at me. "Since I'm hard of hearing, I think it'll sound better out in the garden." He left.

Sensing that this might be the end of peace and quiet in the house, I said, "Why are you trying to do something you were never meant to do? You've been tone-deaf all your life." Then to make sure he'd give up the trumpet, I added, "Besides, everyone will laugh at you."

"You think I wasn't meant to play it? But what if there's no trumpeter in the band, then what? Someone has to play it."

"Why does it have to be you?"

He set the trumpet on the bench and began rocking the cradle. The baby quieted down after a while. "All right, Valya, you wait and see. I'll show you whether I can play it or not."

I knew Yura had a good ear for music, but hoped against hope that he would give up his trumpet. However, he picked it up and went off to the woodshed. A short while later wild blasts began issuing from there.

All through the evenings in the months that followed, when we all longed for rest after the day's work, Yura would drive us mad with his trumpeting.

"There's our genius at it again. I've a mind to move out," Father said and winced, but his tone was more good-natured now than mocking, for he was obviously pleased by his son's perseverance.

Then one evening a long, clear, mournful melody filled the air. "Why, the son-of-a-gun! He really is good! How's that for trumpeting!" Father said. There was such triumph in his voice you'd think it was he and not his son who'd finally learned to play.

Shorty before the November holidays Yura placed several white pasteboard tickets on the table. "Here. There's tickets for everyone. Be sure to come," he said.

I picked one up. The large childish lettering in purple school ink read: "Dear Comrade, the school's amateur performers' group invites you to a special recital." There followed the time and the date. The signature was: "The Young Pioneer Council".

"Will you perform, too?" Father asked.

"Sure!"

"Well then, Mother, get out your best dress. We're going to see what a musician's growing up under our roof. Who knows, maybe he'll be famous some day."

It was interesting to watch Father getting ready for the school recital. He shaved with the greatest of care, then put on his Sunday best and slicked his hair down carefully when he thought no one was looking. All the while he kept hurrying Mother, saying that she was taking too long, that Yura would not see us in the audience and would become upset, and he had to be calm to perform.

The auditorium hummed like a beehive. Girls and boys in white blouses and white shirts adorned with red ties greeted their parents with happy cries and took them to their seats, making sure they were comfortable and had a good view of the stage. We had front-row seats.

When the noise finally died down a boy who was the master of ceremonies came onstage and said the programme would begin with several poems recited by Yura Gagarin of "5A".

"Look, Mother!" Father said, nudging her. I glanced at him and saw his cheeks flushed. Indeed, he was clapping. That's how proud he was of his son.

Yura recited the poem well. The audience applauded and he came back for a bow. You could see he was pleased by the attention he was getting.

It was a long programme, with the children all doing their best. The m.c. was trying hard, too. He would name every performer, even when they performed in large groups, in order to encourage each and every one.

This was when it all began.

The m.c. announced a folk dance. He named the dancers, and we heard him say: "Yura Gagarin, '5A'."

A short while later he announced: "The school band!" And he went on to name the musicians. "Trumpet...." There was our Yura again!

Father fidgeted in his seat. His cheeks were no longer pink. Instead, there were red spots on his face. There was not a trace of pride in his son left in his heart now.

"The school choir..." the m.c. announced, and since it was not a large group anyway, he named the singers. There was Yura, right up front again.

Then, when the m.c. solemnly announced that Yura Gagarin of "5A" would recite an excerpt from *The Young Guard* entitled "My Mother's Hands", Father rose, bent low and headed for the exit, his limp more pronounced than ever.

Yura came onstage at that very moment.

"You shouldn't have got up, Dad," I said to myself. "He'll make a mess of his recitation."

Yura watched helplessly as Father disappeared. Then he took a step towards the edge of the stage and began his recitation in a voice that shook with emotion. After a while he got his voice under control. Since there were so many mothers in the audience, the applause he received in the end was deafening. If Father had stayed on he might have perhaps forgiven his son.

Intermission followed. Mother and I went out into the corridor. Dad was leaning against the window-sill, twisting a cigarette morosely. I could see he was dying for a smoke but did not think it right to smoke in the school.

Yura came running up, the ends of his tie flapping. "Well? Did you like it?"

There was a moment's hesitation on our part.

"That was very nice, dear. You must have seen how pleased everyone was," Mother said.

Father tossed his twisted, broken cigarette into a waste basket, clapped on his hat and said, "It was disgraceful. We should have stayed at home, Mother. Anything rather than this."

Yura was genuinely surprised. "What was so awful? Didn't you hear them clapping? They even called me out for an encore."

"That's just it! They called you out. What's the matter, doesn't anyone else here have any brains except you? All you hear is 'Gagarin'! You have to have a finger in every pie, don't you? Why'd you force yourself on everyone like that? It's enough to make us die of shame!"

Yura seemed confused. He walked off to a side slowly.

"You shouldn't have scolded him like that. You spoiled everything for him," Mother chided.

"Why, he spoiled everything himself. He was after cheap fame, and it's not worth a damn." Father did not remain to see the second half of the performance.

Actually, there was truth to what he said. Luckily, it was a lesson to Yura. He did not stop participating in the amateur group's activities, but he behaved more modestly onstage after that.

When Yura was through doing his homework he put his books in his map-case, pulled on the old sweater Mother had knitted him and stuck his hand behind the oven to get his felt boots. They were gone. "Where can they be?" he said anxiously. "I put them there to dry."

Mother and I looked under the table and under the beds. She went out into the passage, but they seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

"We're playing hockey against the sixth grade today!"

"If you miss a game it won't kill you," Mother reasoned.

"That's what you think. The team'll all be there, but the captain won't. They'll think I chickened out."

Boris came running in at this critical moment. Yura rushed over to him, but his brother was wearing his own boots.

"I know where yours are but I won't tell you," Boris said and smiled mysteriously.

"You'll be sorry!"

"All right. Daddy hid them. I don't know where, though. He said you wreck every pair of shoes you have, and especially now with your skate straps. He said you need boots made of iron."

Yura slouched about the house restlessly. The captain of the "5A's" hockey team would soon be eternally disgraced.

"Valya!" Yura all but wailed and I knew what he meant.

I looked sadly at my new felt boots, bought but two days before, thinking of the cost and imagining two tight cords criss-crossed over the tops and biting into the white felt. I refused politely but firmly. "They're too big for you, Yura. They'll fall off."

"Be a pal, Valya. I'll give you my penknife. All right?"

It was a great sacrifice on his part. The new knife had many blades and was the envy of all his classmates. I could never accept it. "Just this once," I said reluctantly.

"See? They're not too big! They're nearly perfect."

Two hours later Yura returned looking as black as a cloud. He sat down to his supper in silence.

"Lose the game?"

"It was my fault. And all because of them," he added, pointing to my boots. They had been set by the oven. The uppers were deeply creased and the nap was ragged from the cords.

"Sure. But they've paid for it, haven't they. Is that it?"

"They fell off my feet, and the puck sailed right past the goalpost." He bent his head over his plate. It was obvious that there was nothing more to talk about.

When Father returned from work Yura was sitting at the table, reading a book. He raised his head and said with feigned indifference, "I wonder what I'm going to wear to school tomorrow? Maybe I'll go barefoot...."

Father was not to be taken in so easily. "You can go barefoot for all I care. I'm no millionaire to buy you two pairs of boots every winter." He put his hand into the small space between the oven and the floor (why hadn't we thought of looking there?) and pulled out Yura's tattered boots. "You can wear these, holey ones. I wanted to patch them today, but I didn't get the time to. I'm going to throw out those skates of yours, mind my words."

The light bothered me and I tossed in my bed. When I looked at the wall clock I saw it was after one. Everyone was asleep. Someone had forgotten to turn off the lamp in the kitchen. I got up and went in.

Yura was in his shorts and undershirt, hunched over on a high stool. His felt boot lay on Father's work apron that covered his lap. Yura had an awl in one hand and a needle with a length of waxed thread in the other. The upper of an old leather boot was cut into pieces and lay on another stool nearby.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I've got to fix my boots. We're having a return match tomorrow. How does it look?"

He had patched one of the boots. I picked it up and examined it.

"Not bad. It looks professional."

"Want me to patch yours?"

The next morning Father said Yura deserved an "A" for his work. Then, hiding a pleased smile, he said, "Well, if that's how it is, you may as well go on skating."

Yura had a lively imagination, not only for games, but for work as well. He was full of energy and always on the go. I

don't think he ever got tired. He always found time to do any job he was asked to do. He was also able to fire his friends with his own enthusiasm.

One day the chairman of a nearby collective farm summoned the children from Yura's class. About fifteen boys and girls showed up.

The chairman addressed them as follows: "The drought and poor crops these past two years have ruined all our efforts. I'm sure you boys and girls have felt the pinch yourselves. The most important job we have now is to spread fertiliser on the fields. That is why we want to ask you to help us collect ashes and chicken droppings."

"Sure we will." They readily agreed to it.

"Fine. I'm placing a lot of hope in you. The collective farm will repay you by giving you an accordion for the school band." The chairman rose and shook hands with each one. He stood by the window watching them leave.

"Do you think anything will come of it? Don't you think they might cool off after a while?" the bookkeeper, an elderly man in a faded soldier's shirt with two wound stripes on his sleeve, said as he creaked up and down the room on an artificial leg.

"I do think something will come of it. They're a fine bunch."

Meanwhile, the "fine bunch" was excitedly discussing the recent visit to the farm office.

"Remember, he said it was an operation of nearly military importance?" Zhenya Vasilyev said; and his eyes shone.

"Did you see the wound stripes on the bookkeeper's sleeve?"

Suddenly Yura stopped and said, "Wait, everybody! What are we going to name our operation?"

"Fool's gold."

"Spoken by a fool. I know! 'Operation X'!"

"Tarzan in Gzhatsk."

"What has Tarzan got to do with it?"

"It sounds good. And nobody'll know what it's all about."

"I know!" Valya Petrov said and slashed the air. "We'll name it 'Operation Accordion'. What do you say, Yura?"

"That's great. Anyone who has nothing to do with it won't know what it's all about. Let's put it to a vote."

"I'm for it."

"So am I."

"Seconded and passed."

To begin with, they decided to make a wheelbarrow. Zhenya Vasilyev rolled over a huge wheel with heavy spokes.Valya

Petrov lugged over a pair of poles so heavy that he was panting from the effort.

"Give me a hand, fellows," Yura said. The three of them pulled a long crate and several boards from our shed.

"This all right?"

"Perfect."

Their hammers hammered. A saw whined as it chewed through a board. It took half a day of hard work to make the wheelbarrow. Father watched their progress with interest. Finally, he threw off his padded jacket and joined them. "Let me give you a hand," he said. "One wheel won't do the job. You need to put two legs on it for support, so you can set it down easily."

They finished the job by evening. The boys walked around the wheelbarrow proudly. They were really excited by the sight of the unwieldy vehicle. After all, they had made it themselves!

"It's like the tsar's carriage."

"That's no carriage. It's an armoured car!"

"I think something's missing," Yura said mysteriously and went back into the shed. He brought out a can of light-blue paint. "We'll paint its name on the side."

The next morning three boys in unbuttoned coats with their hats pushed back on their heads advanced down Leningradsky Street pushing an impressive-looking wheelbarrow. The word "Accordion" was painted in large letters on its sides.

Passers-by stopped to watch them.

"Hey, why not 'Violin'?" a man asked.

"That's a military secret."

The boys stopped at the first house on the street. "We start here."

They knocked and a woman opened the door. They said they were collecting fertiliser for the collective farm and asked whether she had any extra ashes or chicken droppings.

"Come on over to the barn, boys," she said warmly. Valya whistled as he pulled off his mittens. They were standing in the barn where she kept her hens. "Whew! There's a week's work here."

"That's fine. The more the better."

"I didn't mean anything, Yura."

At the same time other unwieldy vehicles were bumping along the town's streets, as the children of "5A" knocked on every door. In time the women began leaving pails of ashes by their gates or porches in the evenings and were displeased if the children did not empty them on time.

Operation "Accordion" continued through the winter until sowing time.

The following autumn, when the children had been promoted to the sixth grade, a delegation from the collective farm visited the school. The bugler played assembly. After everyone had been seated the collective-farm chairman rose to speak.

"Dear girls and boys," he said, "I want you to know that we've taken in a good harvest this year. A very good harvest. There's a bit of your labour in every single ear of corn that ripened in our fields. You all recall that we promised you an accordion for your share of the work. However...." Here he stopped to take a breath, while the children all froze in their seats.

Had something unforeseen happened? Would they not get the accordion after all? Was that how he kept his promise?

"...However," he continued, "after the preliminary figures were in, the board decided to increase your bonus. You all did a splendid job! We've brought the promised accordion, and a guitar and balalaika as well. And we hope you have lots of fun playing them."

Everyone cheered. The school band played a flourish. The bookkeeper handed the Young Pioneer leader a ledger and said, "Please sign here. The operation was a great success."

I have to smile when I think of the way Yura changed my whole life. I had been single and then suddenly became a married man.

This is how it all came about.

I was going visiting. I shaved carefully and combed my hair in front of the mirror. Then I knotted and redid my tie several times. Yura was at the table, reading a book. I noticed that he was watching me on the sly. Finally, he said, "Why are you getting all dressed up, Valya?"

"I'm going to propose."

He put down his book and stood up. His eyes got as big as saucers as he breathed, "You're lying."

"Why should I?"

"Then take me along. You won't be sorry."

"I was fooling. I'm just going to visit a girl."

I could see that he didn't know whether to believe me or not. He was terribly disappointed. "Ah..., I thought I'd go courting with you."

"All right, come along."

Actually, I was happy to have him along. It wasn't far to the next village, but considering crutches.... Besides, I was going to call on a girl I hardly knew, and I had no guarantee that she'd even let me in. It would be easier with a companion along.

Yura rushed to get on his "best" clothes, which consisted of his black school trousers, white shirt and Young Pioneer tie.

"Is she a nice girl, Valya?"

"Very nice."

"Let's go."

It was the first Sunday of May, a still, sunny day.

All the way to the village of Gorlovo Yura kept questioning me about the girl."What's she like, Valya? What's her name?"

"She's twenty and very serious. Her name's Masha Ivanova. Is that all right with you?"

"Yep. You'd never forget a name like that."

I hardly knew Masha and certainly had no intention of proposing to her. I really had been fooling. The reason I was going to see her was to cement our budding friendship. I had noticed her at a party to which I had hobbled with my friends. She was a pretty girl, but much too shy. The boys later told me that she was an orphan and lived with her sister.

After that first evening I couldn't get Masha out of my mind. I had seen her two or three times in the days that followed, and had actually asked her to invite me to her house.

"Here we are, Yura."

Masha was home alone. She opened the door and became terribly embarrassed, but invited us in, nevertheless.

"Sit down, boys," she said once we were inside.

I sat down on the bench. Yura stood there bashfully for a few minutes and then plopped down next to me. Masha stood by the window, worrying a button on her blouse. Yura nudged me, as if to say: "Well, say something." My mouth was dry. I had no idea on how to begin a conversation with a girl. This silence lasted for a good two minutes. This gave me plenty of time to study the scrubbed wooden floor boards and to decide that a suitor on crutches was a pretty sorry sight. I had a nerve coming here, what with all the fine, healthy fellows there were in Gzhatsk and Gorlovo. The boys would always crowd round a girl like that.

Yura nudged me again. I couldn't remain silent any longer. It simply wasn't polite. "This is my brother Yura."

"Oh, I know him. He's been to our village before. You look a lot alike." She was looking out the window all the time and never once at us.

An awkward silence followed.

Yura must have realised that I would be of no help in the conversation and took matters into his own hands. I was vaguely aware of them speaking and sat up with a start when I heard him say, "What if Valya comes to propose, Masha? Will you chase him away?"

I was dumbfounded. "Just you wait till I get my hands on you, Yura!" I thought.

Luckily for me, Masha was an honest girl. She turned away from the window, looked at me gravely and said, "If you're not joking.... No, I won't chase him away."

After that we all felt relaxed and elated. I was in seventh heaven. We had tea accompanied by lively conversation. I was happy to see that Masha and Yura had taken an instant liking to each other. I did not even mind when they joined forces to tease me. It was getting late when we finally returned home.

"Do Mother and Dad know, Valya?"

I guessed what he meant, but said, "Know what, Yura?"

"About you. That you want to get married."

"Not yet. But that's my personal affair," I replied, trying to sound independent.

"I know...." His words trailed off. He was silent, but I knew what was worrying him: Father's reaction to my independence. To tell the truth, it was worrying me, too, for Dad was not one to be crossed.

However, it was too late to back out now. Choosing what I thought to be the right moment after supper, I told my parents I intended to start my own family.

"Are you going off to be somebody's son-in-law? Leaving your own house? And you're the eldest son! What will people say?" Father raged.

However, Mother soon placated him, pointing out that we were very cramped and that it was high time for me to be independent.

Soon after Mother and Dmitry, Zoya's husband, set out for Gorlovo Village to meet Masha. The wedding was held on Victory Day, May 9th.

"Where'd you ever find such a girl, Valya? She's a fine girl," Father said at the wedding.

Masha smiled. "The matchmaker in the Young Pioneer tie is responsible for everything," she replied, indicating Yura. "Valya would have been a bachelor for many more years if not for him."

I moved to Gorlovo after the wedding.

Towards the end of September Dad came to visit us. I was in a black mood that day and he sensed it immediately.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

I sighed and said, "It's time to dig the potatoes, but there's no one to dig them. I'm stuck on these damn crutches, and Masha's expecting. And there's no one we could pay to do the job. Look at the sky. It'll start raining any day now, if the frost doesn't set in first."

Father laughed. "You're a silly boy, Valya, to think up so many problems. Listen to me now. You shouldn't ever have moved away. It's hard to manage when you're alone. The first chance we get we'll move your cottage to Gzhatsk. I've found a good site for it, too. And don't worry your head about the potatoes. You just get the sacks out. I'll send your brothers over in the morning."

They showed up at dawn.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Yura said reproachfully.

"One thing, though: please don't stand around telling us what to do," Boris added.

They finished the job by evening.

Late that autumn we moved our little cottage to Gzhatsk and reassembled it beside the family's cottage. Once again we were all together. I felt that things were looking up for me.

That summer Yura surprised us by becoming unusually interested in his surroundings. True, he always had an inquisitive mind, but now his interests were centred on a study of nature. He started a nature diary in which he entered the time of sunrise and sunset, cloud formations, the velocity of the wind, made sketches of flowering trees, noted the time the fruit appeared on the apple and cherry trees, when the starlings hatched and when the first shoots of wheat appeared in the fields.

He would go off into the meadows and return with pockets full of stones. He kept his stones in a long, shallow wooden box he had made expressly for the purpose. Each stone had its own small partition and each was classified.

He made a herbarium in which he dried the grasses and flowers that grew along the banks of the Gzhat River. One day he showed us his treasures. We were more than surprised to learn that there were nearly two hundred varieties of grass which we unthinkingly trod upon each day.

Yura hardly ever went beyond the back gardens where Boris and his indefatigable friends spent their days playing war. This game, which had so recently been a favourite pastime, now bored him.

The two years' difference in age between Yura and Boris had become very noticeable.

Chapter 4

BESPALOV

There was a deafening explosion near the house in the dead of night. I jumped up and lit the lamp.

"What's that?" Masha asked anxiously.

A second explosion followed.

She turned pale. "Don't go outside, Valya."

I dressed in silence, stuck my feet into my felt boots and ran outside. I could sense the panic, with the family all out on the porch. Father held a lantern. Mother had thrown her coat over her shoulders. Boris stood by her side. Everyone was excited and talking all together. Yura was nowheres in sight.

"What happened?" I shouted as I ran up to them.

"What the hell!" Father cursed. "Looks like somebody's been fooling around with hand grenades. See, all the windows are smashed."

We discovered two craters surrounded by shattered glass in the snow under the front windows. Father picked up a piece of glass and held it up to the lantern. It did not look like window glass.

"You scoundrel! You're in for trouble this time, my boy!" Father swore.

There was no need to ask whom he had in mind. Naturally, he was referring to Yura. I looked in on the family the next morning. They were having breakfast. Yura sat at the table as still as a mouse, with his head bent over his plate and his spoon scraping the edge of it.

I guessed that he had been punished. Father was limping across the room.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Don't you know, we have a scientist in the family! A regular professor!" Father fumed. "He's been performing experiments!"

Yura raised his head a bit and said in a low voice, "I must have made a mistake. Our physics teacher told us to try it at home."

"And did he also tell you to smash two three-litre jars? And did the teachers tell you to break the windows, too? Do they teach you to be vandals and give you good marks for that? What sort of a school is it that wrecks the house?" Father would not be stopped.

Yura chewed his breakfast meekly.

I finally understood what Father was talking about. As far back as I could remember we had always had two wide-necked dark-green three-litre bottles that stood in wicker baskets. They had always been used for storing kerosene and had only been empty during the war years. Yura had apparently used them for an experiment and they had accidentally blown up.

"All right, Dad," I said placatingly. "It's time to change over to metal gasoline cans anyway."

However, it was not that simple to cool Dad off. I went back home. About ten minutes later Yura dropped by on his way to school.

"What was it all about?" I asked.

He smiled mischievously and said somewhat vaguely, "It was a little experiment with oxygen. There was something I forgot about, though...." He snatched a hot soy-bean pancake from the pan and dashed out, tossing it from hand to hand. He was back in a moment, to say, "You know who our physics teacher is? Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov. He was a fighter pilot, that's what!" The door slammed behind him.

Lev Mikhailovich came to classes dressed in his old tunic which bore the marks of shoulder straps and small holes where his medals had been. He was always neat and cleanly shaven, and though he was still a young man, he had been through much and had seen much.

When he opened the door the children would rise and practically stand at attention, for each one wanted to prove that he or she knew what military bearing meant.

"Good morning, children!"

"Good morning, Lev Mikhailovich!" came the precise reply.

Bespalov would open the class journal and call the roll.

"Vasilyev."

"Here!"
"Gagarin."
"Here!"
"Durasova."
"Here!"

Even the boldest of the children did not once try to act smart in his class. Everything was done seriously and in true military style, and yet the atmosphere was natural and easy. The children had taken an immediate liking to Bespalov and did not become disappointed in him later. They were not afraid of him, for he was not a strict man. On the contrary, he was a jolly and enthusiastic person with a devil-may-care attitude at times. He was also an excellent teacher.

"Yura Gagarin, please come up front. Let's see.....You got an 'A' for your homework yesterday. Have you studied today's assignment?"

"Yes."

"Fine. But we'll begin a new topic first. Will you try to explain to the class why an apple falls from a tree."

"That's easy. It falls when it's ripe."

"Correct. But why does it fall down instead of falling up? Why will a stone you've tossed up also fall down? Have you ever thought about that?"

"It's because the Earth is closer than the Moon."

"There's some truth in that. Now take a piece of chalk and draw the Earth and an apple tree on it. And draw an apple next to the tree. Come on, you can draw better than that. Now, children, there is a law in physics called the law of gravity. It was discovered by Isaac Newton. We shall now try to see what it's all about."

Lev Mikhailovich understood his pupils. His keen sense of perception where they were concerned often surprised them. One day he called on Valya Petrov and looked at him closely. Valya dropped his eyes and tugged at the sleeves of his jacket.

"I see that you spent the evening teasing your cat, Petrov. Can you tell us why you were torturing the poor creature?"

"Was my mother here to tell you?"

"No. Unfortunately, I have not yet met your parents. Answer my question: why were you torturing the cat?"

Valya blushed and confessed shyly. "I was making electricity. I only patted it a bit to ruffle its coat."

"To ruffle its coat, you say? That's very interesting. I gather you mean against the fur. Am I right? And did you make any electricity?"

"Yep. You should have heard the fur crackle."

"Try to answer this, and all of you, too: if you had bathed the cat, could you have got an electric charge according to Petrov's method?"

"No!"

"Did you say 'No' Vasilyev? Please explain. You don't know? Try to figure it out. I'll give you all five minutes to come up with an answer."

The bell rang. Lev Mikhailovich left the classroom. Valya Petrov stood shamefacedly among a group of boys. "How'd he guess about the cat?"

"He can see right through you."

"He has X-ray vision."

"He jumped out of a burning plane during the war and wasn't hurt!"

Zhenya Vasilyev took hold of Valya's elbow. "Hey Yura! Look at his hands."

Valya's hands and wrists were full of deep scratches. Yura looked at his friend's hands, then held out his own. "Mine aren't any better," he said. He, too, had "ruffled" his cat's coat the previous evening, trying to make electricity.

Lev Mikhailovich began one of his lessons in "6A" by saying, quite unexpectedly, "I've been wondering, children, about how much we know about planes and aviation."

Everyone perked up. They could sense that something unusual was in the offing.

"Well then: how much do we know?"

"A lot!"

"Shut up!"

"We used to know a lot, but we've forgotten everything."

"What do we need to know for?"

Lev Mikhailovich waited patiently until they had all had their say and then continued, "We know very little. That is why I suggest we organise an aviation club. We'll build scale models of real planes. And they'll really fly. This will also teach us a lot about the laws of physics. All those who want to join can sign up with the monitor during recess."

Three weeks later the club members went to the bank of the Gzhat River to test their first plane. It was made of reeds and was an exact replica of a fighter plane. It had a small gasoline engine and really looked professional.

"Go!" Bespalov shouted.

The fighter plane zoomed across the icy river, heading for

the steep, snow-covered bank opposite, while the children gazed starry-eyed at its flight. This was no paper airplane. It was just like a real, genuine plane!

When the plane had disappeared from sight, Yura was the first to run out onto the ice. The children climbed up and down the opposite bank, covering the soft snow with thousands of tracks, but they were unable to locate the plane.

"Don't look so sad, boys," Lev Mikhailovich said, trying to cheer them up. "We've started the ball rolling and that's what's important. Too bad we have so little time. And it's winter. Conditions aren't exactly what they should be."

Indeed, the conditions under which the model plane club functioned were far from satisfactory: the children were not allowed to stay on in the building for any length of time after school was out, since kerosene for the lamps had to be used sparingly. Besides, no one could work in the icy air of the cold classroom for long.

"We'll keep the club going in the summer, too, if you wish," Lev Mikhailovich continued. "We'll build new models that will be still better than this was. It all depends on whether you want to or not. Do you?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"We won't back down now."

"Good. I can see you boys may grow up to be flyers."

In practically no time Yura had learned to make flying models himself. To Boris' undiminishing joy he soon had every nook and cranny of the house filled with them. Boris was then in the third grade and would come home from school before Yura. He would take any plane that caught his eye and go outside with it. It is impossible to say how many models he and his chums broke.

Yura rarely got angry. He would repair the broken plane with rare patience or else would make a new one. Carpentry tools were greatly respected in our home. Now the smell of pine shavings and glue was stronger than ever.

One day Bespalov met Father in the street. "I admire Yura's dedication," he said. "That boy has a future in the Air Force."

The teacher's words flattered Father, yet he did not hesitate to object, saying, "As high as all that? No one in our family ever left the ground. As soon as he's out of the seventh grade he'll go on carpentry jobs with me. I've already made him an axe to fit his hand."

"I don't think you should be in such a hurry. That boy has talent."

"You need talent for carpentry, too, if you don't want to do a job sloppily. Besides, it'll be too much of a strain on the family if he doesn't go to work."

They parted. However, Bespalov was a smart fellow, and we soon had evidence of this.

One winter's day Lev Mikhailovich invited Yura, Zhenya Vasilyev and Valya Petrov to go ice-fishing with him. They were very lucky, with both Yura and Valya bringing home three large pike each. Father looked doubtful. "I'll bet the teacher gave them to you. You can't tell me you caught them yourselves."

"But we did." Yura protested. "And we'll go again."

Boris set out with him the next time, but returned home an hour later.

"What's the matter, fisherman?" we asked.

"The wind's blowing the wrong way, so the fish aren't biting today."

"Then why didn't Yura come home? What's he doing there?"

"The teacher's with him. They've made a bonfire and they're sitting around, keeping warm and talking about airplanes."

From then on Yura and the boys often went fishing with their teacher. Many were the times when they'd come home empty-handed, but even then it was a pleasure to look at Yura: he would be cheerful, excited and in high spirits. He kept pestering us with his questions.

"Would you want to fly a jet fighter, Valya?"

"When was the first time you ever saw a plane, Dad?"

"D'you know how Chkalov flew a plane under a bridge, Boris? You don't? Golly!"

"Lev Mikhailovich is putting all sorts of crazy ideas into his head," Father grumbled.

"Bespalov won't teach him anything bad," Mother protested. "Yura is lucky to have such a teacher."

Despite his grumbling, Father saw that Mother was right. For instance, Lev Mikhailovich taught the children to value their time. Yura followed his advice and drew up a schedule for himself. He would rise at seven, have a cold rubdown, eat breakfast and review his assignments before leaving for school. He never deviated from his schedule.

"Let's wrestle," he said as he pounced on me one day.

"Let's," I replied in an amused voice. I was sure I'd have him on his back in a moment, and was astounded to discover that his muscles were made of steel. It was quite a tussle.

Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov now lives in Nalchik. He was forced to move to a warmer climate on account of ill health, when his old wounds began to bother him. He came to visit me in Ryazan several times, and we always spoke of Yura.

"You know, I had faith in that boy," he once said. "He had a searching mind, he was alert and very disciplined. Such boys make excellent flyers." He went on to say that he had consciously tried to interest Yura in flying. "I would never have been grounded of my own will, but my health gave out," he continued. "You know, a man always hopes that someone else will carry on where he left off."

Yura was always lucky in having fine friends and fine teachers. Lev Mikhailovich, his physics teacher, was just such a real friend and wise teacher.

Chapter 5

HAYING

Yura and Boris were fooling around with our mongrel Tobik, teaching him to do tricks, when the gate creaked and Valya Petrov appeared.

"Hi!"

Valya looked quite dashing, wearing a paper hat, with a tightly-packed knapsack on his back and several fishing rods in his hand.

Yura rushed up to his friend. "Where've you been? I called on you a hundred times, but there's a lock on the door."

Valya squinted mockingly. "As if you don't know. The whole class has been slaving away haying all week, while the monitor, as I see, has been cooling his heels at home."

"Slaving away?"

"Sure. Turning hay, drying it as we go along. Those who know how to mow were given scythes. Like me, for instance. Today's my day off, 'cause Lev Mikhailovich sent me home for my tackle. He said I should come over and see you. He thought you were sick. But you're busy fooling around with Tobik. That really is something. You're a deserter, Yura, that's what."

"But I didn't know anything about it."

"Quit lying. We told Boris to tell you we were leaving for the collective farm. Didn't we tell you, Boris?"

Boris mumbled something incoherently and bent over to scratch Tobik's ear. Yura turned on him in a rage. "Well? Say something!" he shouted.

Boris realised he was in for trouble and streaked out of the yard and across the street. Once at a safe distance he turned and shouted, "I forgot. I forgot all about it." He was afraid to tell his elder brother he had consciously withheld the teacher's message. How could he explain that he didn't want to remain at home all by himself with no one to play with?

"Well? D'you want me to wait for you?" Valya asked.

"Sure!" Yura pulled out my old army knapsack and said, "Ma, pack me some food to take along."

"Are you going to be away long, Valya?" Mother asked anxiously.

"For about three weeks. Till we finish the job. But don't bother about giving him any food. We get fed very well there. They give us meat and milk, and eggs. Yesterday the chairman brought us white bread and honey. He said that was for our good work. And we treated him to jam. The girls went picking berries and Iraida Dmitriyevna made the jam."

Iraida Dmitriyevna Troitskaya was the assistant principal.

As Yura listened to Valya, his cheeks turned flaming red.

"See, dear, I don't even have to give you anything. They'll feed you there," Mother said, fingering the sack undecidedly.

"We even had new potatoes!" Valya continued excitedly.

The new potatoes were the last straw. "Give me some food to take along, Ma. I haven't earned what they're eating yet."

Valya realised he had poured it on too heavily and said, "Don't be a dope! What are you going to do, sit off to a side all by yourself and eat your own provisions? You'd better take some books along to read, and don't forget your blanket."

"All right. I'll get some books." Yura was soon ready. He slung the knapsack over his shoulder and hummed a snatch from "He was off to the Front" as he went over to Mother to say goodbye.

"Now be a good boy."

"Don't worry, Mamma, everything will be just fine. And just you wait, I'll work hard and catch up with them!"

"You little braggart," she said and kissed him goodbye.

The sky was high and cloudless, and studded with large stars as thickly as an ear of wheat with kernels. The boys had been in

for a dip. The children had had their supper and were now sitting around a campfire as they usually did, looking at Bespalov expectantly.

"I'll tell you an ancient legend today. It's about a youth named Icarus. This legend has come to us from Ancient Greece, for mankind has carried it down through the centuries."

Bespalov spoke in a soft, unhurried voice. The children listened raptly to the beautiful tale, afraid to miss a word. As the swaying, flickering flames licked greedily at the dry branches, the enchanted audience imagined they were the wings the skilled and wise Daedalus had fashioned.

"Did he burn to death?" Tonya Durasova interrupted in a frightened voice.

Everyone shushed her.

"The sun melted the glue and the wings came off. Then Icarus dropped into the sea and the waters closed over him," Lev Mikhailovich said. "This legend has a sad ending, but the story is full of sunlight and promise."

They sat around the fire in silence for a long while. Finally, Lev Mikhailovich said it was time for bed. They got up obediently. The children made their beds on the fragrant hay, covering themselves with their blankets.

No one felt like sleeping. They lay there, looking up at the starry sky. Zhenya Vasilyev was the first to speak. "I think I'll be a sailor. I'll travel to Africa, and to India...."

"Sailors don't travel, they sail," Valya Petrov sneered.

"No difference."

"I thought you wanted to be a flyer like Lev Mikhailovich. You sure change your mind quick."

"It's just as interesting to be a sailor, isn't it, Yura? Well, isn't it?"

"Yes, but...."

"But what?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Leave him alone, Zhenya. Can't you see his nerves are on edge today?"

Yura sat up and hugged his knees. He rested his head on them and said, "I'm in trouble, fellows. Dad says that as soon as I graduate next year he wants me to go on carpentry jobs with him."

Zhenya whistled. "I'd run away from home if I were you."

"That's not new. Then the militia finds you and takes you back," Valya said.

"Don't be a sap, Valya. This isn't like in olden times. The militia won't ever find you nowadays."

"Let's go to sleep." Yura stretched out on the grass and turned over on his side.

"Quit shoving," Zhenya said.

"I can't sleep. I'm thinking...."

"What about?"

"All kinds of things. Don't talk to me, all right?"

The collective farmers stacked the last haystack with the children's aid. Soon the chairman joined them. "Thank you, dear helpers," he said solemnly. "We'll be expecting you again next summer. Be sure to come again."

"We will."

"And we'll put on a recital for you, too."

"But don't ask any kids from any other school."

"Agreed," the chairman said with a smile. He then shook Bespalov's hand.

The children were adjusting their knapsacks and talking excitedly. They had all protested loudly at the offer of a ride into town, having decided to hike back instead. After all, they had spent a whole month in the fields and were reluctant to be whisked away so quickly from the freedom of the vast open spaces.

"Let's go," Bespalov said. "Fall in, Gagarin."

"One minute, Lev Mikhailovich," Yura said and ran over to the farm chairman.

"Ah, an old acquaintance," the chairman said pleasantly. "You were the one who thought up 'Operation Accordion', weren't you?"

"I don't want you to be angry with me," Yura said, looking him straight in the eye. "The kids promised to come back again next summer, but I don't think I'll be able to."

"Didn't you like it here?"

"Sure I did. Very much. But I won't be able to come again." With these words he turned and ran off to catch up with the others.

Several days later Mother said to Father, "Yura's changed a lot. He kept always running in and out, but now he just slouches around. Something's bothering him."

"It's his age," Father replied. Then, since he was dissatisfied

with his own reply, he added, "After all, don't forget he's fifteen. I'll bet he's begun looking at the girls."

"No, that's not it. He has something on his mind. I don't know what it is, and I don't know how to get him to tell me. Why, he can't even talk civilly. Look at Boris. He's been keeping out of Yura's way all this time."

Everything came to a head at supper that evening. Mother, as always, had been correct in sensing that something was up. Our parents and Yura were sitting at the table, eating new potatoes, dill pickles and drinking buttermilk. Actually, only Mother and Father were eating, Yura was running his finger around the edge of his plate.

"Had your fill, son?"

Mother's question seemed to give him the impetus he lacked. He took a deep breath, and, staring straight ahead, said in a voice that was close to despair, "I'm going to a trade school."

"What?"

"To a trade school in Moscow. I've thought it all out."

Mother's eyes filled with tears. "Zoya and Valya have only just returned, and now you've decided to run away from home. Is life with us so awful? Are we chasing you out of the house?"

"Everything's fine. But I want to learn a trade. I want to work in a factory and go to college. I don't want to go through life with only seven grades of schooling."

Father had not uttered a word. Now he threw down his knife, rose and stalked out. This was not as he had planned.

"Have a heart, Yura. Stay at home with us, dear. You can graduate from a ten-year school here. Father won't mind. Then, after school, you'll have your army service. You can decide what to do when you return. Maybe you'll go on to college then."

When Yura saw Mother's tear-filled eyes he felt he might weaken and so, biting his lip, he continued doggedly, "I'm grown up, Mamma, I can earn my own keep. I know how hard it is for Dad to support all of us. If I go to a trade school I'll get my board and clothes free. And I'll be a worker like Grandpa. I've made up my mind, Ma. You help me try to convince Dad."

Meanwhile, Father was raging in the yard outside. "Just you wait till I get my hands on you, Boris! How many times did I tell you never to leave the axe in a stick of wood!"

Boris was busy in a corner. He was making himself a shield from a sheet of tin, wielding our large shears. A wooden spear with a sharpened tip was propped against the wall beside him.

"That wasn't me. It was Yura. He stuck it in yesterday."

"Well, couldn't you put it back in its place?" Father bent over and wrenched the axe handle, but it did not give. It was stuck up to the butt in the wood. Father spat angrily, stamped off and immediately forgot about the axe. "Now the younger one is getting ready to run," he thought irritably, and although he realised that Yura was heading in the right direction, nothing was turning out as he had planned.

Yura was just beginning to show promise of future strength. He was a strong, wiry boy. Father had waited patiently for this time for many years and had placed great hopes in his sons. He dreamed of an able, close-knit and skilled carpenters' team in which every member bore the name Gagarin. We'd be known throughout the district.

During his evening smoke with his friends on the bench outside our house he would sometimes muse aloud, "Valya's probably as good with an axe now as I am. Yura's growing up to be a smart boy, too. He has a keen eye and never misses a thing. I think he'll learn the ropes quickly. And I'm still going strong. We'll be building houses all over the district, because that's what's most needed now. The Germans destroyed everything. It'll take a lot of work to put things back as they were. And if my strength gives out, and that won't be soon, believe me, why, Boris will be coming up by then. A carpenter's trade is the best trade there is in this forest region."

The old carpenter had his heart set on handing down his skill and knowledge to his sons. He had learned his trade from his father, a former tsarist soldier. But things were not turning out as he had planned. I, his oldest son, had become a driver and was now stuck to my truck. True, on my days off and during my vacations I would often fool around with an axe, but this was not a serious occupation, it was merely a change during my free time.

Now Yura had got it into his head to escape from home. What was it he had said? "I've thought it all out." Why, he was still a baby, but no better than his elder brother in wanting to be independent. Father paced limpingly up and down the yard, walking into sticks of firewood, kicking them with his good foot, cursing and muttering under his breath.

Boris was at a loss to understand what was wrong. He ran into the house, discovered the reason and became downcast himself. "Yura's so pig-headed he'll never give in, Dad," he said, upset by Father's grief and Mother's tears.

"We'll see about that," Father muttered and headed for the house. He thought he had found a way out.

There was dead silence inside. Mother had calmed down somewhat, but she had not the courage to intervene on Yura's behalf. She was clearing the table and kept dropping things. The culprit sat on the bench, gazing intently out the window.

"I'll write a letter to Savva," Father said. "And whatever he says, goes. He's lived in Moscow his whole life and knows what the score is. If he says you're to forget this silliness of yours, you will. And you'll finish your schooling here."

Father's elder brother Savely worked in the Ministry of Construction. Mother looked at Father in amazement. Didn't he know how Savva and his wife Pasha loved Yura? Why, they'd move mountains to have their nephew studying in Moscow.

However, Father winked at her slyly, as if to say: don't worry, I wasn't born yesterday. He got out the inkwell and a pen and sat down to write the letter.

I believe it was more difficult for him to write that letter than to put up a house. I don't know what he wrote, but it was obvious he did his best to convince his brother to talk Yura out of leaving home.

Yura took the letter to the post office. Days of endless waiting followed. Yura forgot all about the river and the woods, spending all his time at home. The postman reached our street after lunch, but long before that Yura would be out by the gate, waiting for him.

"Is there anything for us?"

"They're still writing, young man," the postman would invariably reply. He was an old man and always wore a grey suit and a green coast guard cap. One day, when he was still quite a distance away, he waved a blue envelope at Yura cheerfully.

Yura snatched it from him and tumbled into the house. "Here! It's from Uncle Savva."

"Read it," Father said. Yura's hands were trembling.

The letter began with the usual greetings to every member of the family. Then Yura's voice fell as he read the following lines: "You're a bit late about applying to a trade school, Yura. Enrollment is over for the year. Besides, you've only had six years of schooling and you should have had seven...."

"See what intelligent people say," Father said triumphantly. "After you graduate from seven-year school you can go wherever you want to. Meanwhile, stay home and study." He was thinking that a year meant a lot and that he could knock

this nonsense out of Yura's head in a year's time. Good for Savva. He was a fine man!

"Wait! Listen to this, Dad," Yura said breathlessly. "'However, all is not lost. If you start out immediately, we'll try to see what can be done....'" Yura turned to his father. "See? Uncle Savva says to start out right away! Let's get my stuff together."

Yura set out for the school to get his papers, but was refused. That evening Iraida Dmitriyevna, the assistant principal, and Lev Mikhailovich both came to the house. Mother sent Boris over to fetch me.

They told us that they would be very sorry to lose such a capable boy. The conversation lasted a long time, with the teachers trying to convince Yura not to make any hasty decisions.

"After you've graduated from seven-year school you'll still be able to enter a trade school," Iraida Dmitriyevna said. "However, I suggest you stay on and graduate from the ten-year school."

Yura was adamant. Nothing they said could sway him.

"Why don't you want to continue on in school?" I asked. "Zoya and I have both been helping out at home. All you have to do is worry about your studies. No one's asking anything of you."

He sounded desperate when he interrupted me. "Don't you understand me, either?"

I said no more.

In a word, all our arguments were in vain. The teachers sadly bid us farewell. The next morning Yura got his papers from school and we bought two tickets for Moscow.

Our parents came out onto the porch to see us off. Boris remained indoors and wept loudly. However, he was ashamed to say why he was crying and so insisted he had a stomachache.

Father kissed Yura soundly. "All right, if that's the way you want it. And remember, don't disgrace our name!" Then he turned to Mother and chided, "Stop it! You've wept oceans these two days." However, his own eyes glittered suspiciously.

Mother embraced Yura and held him close, saying, "If it was up to me, I'd never let you go, son."

"Come on, now," I said. "You'd think he was going across the ocean. It's only a three hour ride to Moscow."

We closed the gate.

"Valya!" Mother called.

I turned back.

"You tell the teachers to be very strict with him. Maybe they'll even send him back home. My heart aches for him."

"All right," I mumbled, avoiding her eyes.

Chapter 6

"OFF WE GO!"

The grey station building and the assistant station-master in his red cap began moving off into the distance, becoming smaller and smaller.

"Off we go!"

I was the only one who heard Yura say this. I doubt that our fellow-travellers heard it. One was a sinewy man with a moustache. He was missing an arm and had on a worn officer's tunic. The second passenger was a young woman. Some twelve years later the entire world would hear this short phrase of his.

Yura gazed out of the window in fascination, tugging at my sleeve every minute to say, "Look, Valya! Look!"

This was the very first time in all his fifteen years that he had embarked upon a real journey. The farthest he had ever gone before was from Klushino Village to Gzhatsk and back again. This was also the first time he was on a train, something he had always dreamed of. It was a rattling old car, battered during its endless journeys in wartime. It had broad wooden benches and dirty windows with the grime of many years stuck fast to them.

Still green copses flashed by, interspersed with the yellow stubble of harvested fields, as did the station houses, buildings, towns and villages along the way. Everything was new and interesting to Yura.

The one-armed man, recognising a comrade in me by my own faded army shirt, inquired politely, "Where are you taking the boy, soldier, if it's no secret?"

"To Moscow, to get smart."

"A worthy mission." The man moved over to the window opposite Yura. "This your first trip, son? Well, then, I'll tell you all about these parts. It's a very interesting line. So much blood has been shed here, both in olden times and in our own days. We'll soon be nearing Borodino, a field of eternal Russian glory. Do you know about Kutuzov? You should. As

soon as you spot a monument with an eagle on the left side of the road you'll know it's Borodino." He fished into his pocket, pulled out a pouch and handed it to me. "Have a smoke, soldier. What outfit were you in?"

"Valya was a tankman," Yura replied before I had a chance to say anything. "He was a gunner on a T-34 tank."

"That makes us buddies. I'm an artillery man myself." He nodded at the empty sleeve that was fastened with a safety pin. "I left my arm on Borodino Field. Ever read about Captain Tushin? We were just like him...."

The former gunner proved to be a wonderful conversationalist. He knew the name of every little town and village on the way and told us many interesting facts about each one.

"Are you a teacher?" Yura asked.

"No. I'm just interested in the history of my country. I'm a bookkeeper." Using his one hand deftly, he rolled another cigarette and pointed out the window, "Petrishchevo is over there."

Yura jumped to his feet. "You mean the village where the partisan girl Zoya was executed?"

"Yes."

As we said goodbye at the station in Moscow he ran his hand over Yura's head and said, "The main thing is never to lose heart. You keep thinking about the road that brought you to the capital. It will always bolster your spirits."

"Who was that Captain Tushin he spoke about, Valya?"

"Probably another hero."

We entered the Metro. It was very crowded, with masses of people hurrying up and down the stairways and the escalators.

"Where are they all running to, Valya?"

"They all value their time here. They count every minute."

I had a firm grip on his hand, for I didn't want to lose him in the crush. In my other hand I carried the small plywood suitcase Father had made. It contained my brother's few personal belongings. Yura was astounded. He wanted to get a close look at everything: the murals on the walls of the underground stations that were like marble palaces, the blue cars of the underground trains and the people.

I had only been in Moscow a few times before and felt rather self-conscious among all those well-dressed inhabitants of the capital. I imagined how I looked to them in my worn army shirt and saw Yura as they did, with his hair closely cropped and dressed in a pair of cheap trousers and a cheap cotton shirt. I was overcome with treacherous doubts. What were we doing

here? Would Yura ever find his place here? My feeling of insecurity was catching. Yura gripped my hand still tighter.

"Watch out!"

"You're blocking the way!"

These words were addressed to us.

We finally squeezed into the packed car. Elbows jammed into our ribs as we stood there face-to-face. In order to somehow drive the worrisome thoughts from my mind I began telling Yura about the Berlin underground. I had seen it towards the end of the war. The tunnels were narrower, the trains were nondescript, and the stations did not resemble palaces at all.

"That's what I thought. I was sure our Metro was better than all the others," Yura replied.

We got out at Sokol Station and went to our uncle's house. His wife, Aunt Pasha, opened the door and exclaimed, "Finally! We didn't know what to think. When Uncle Savva left for work this morning he said that if you didn't come today we'd send you a telegram this evening."

She bustled about and then sat us down at the table. "This is just a bite to tide you over. When Uncle Savva and the girls come home from work we'll have a real party."

She couldn't sit still, hurrying back and forth to the kitchen and coming in with hot soup, bread and various snacks.

Yura gazed at the table in wonder. Neither he nor I had ever seen so many plates, dishes, forks and knives, to say nothing of the food. At the first opportunity he whispered to me, "Let's not eat much. They've got a big family, too."

I don't know how Aunt Pasha overheard him. She came over to Yura, put her hand on his shoulder and said, "I never want to hear you say anything like that again. Understand?"

Yura turned as red as a beet. "I'm sorry, Aunt Pasha."

I glanced at him and chuckled. Then Aunt Pasha laughed and said, "Never mind, Yura. You'll get used to us. How do you like what you've seen of Moscow?"

"I like everything. Except that there are too many people everyplace."

"You'll get used to that, too."

Soon Uncle Savva and our cousins Tonya and Lida came home from work. We had a wonderful family dinner that evening. This was on a Saturday. The next day, Sunday, our cousins took Yura sight-seeing. They visited Red Square, the Historical Museum and went to the Zoo. Yura, who was unused to the crowds and commotion of Moscow, was dead on his feet

by evening. As he fell into bed that night he mumbled, "If I'd known Moscow was so interesting I'd have come here sooner."

On Monday Uncle Savva, Yura and I went the rounds to every trade school in Moscow. We were told the same thing everywhere we went:

"Enrollment is over for the year. Besides, we only accept pupils who have completed a seven-year school."

Yura was crestfallen. "Dad was right. I'll have to go back to school for another year."

Aunt Pasha was just as upset as he. However, she tried to cheer him up by saying, "Never mind, dear. I'm sure something will turn up. I can't believe that no one will accept you."

That evening Tonya came home with good news. "There's a trade school in Lyubertsy that's affiliated with the local farm machinery plant and they say they accept pupils with six grades of schooling. We'll go there tomorrow first thing. I've taken the day off from my job."

We were met rather coldly there, however, for there was a great crowd of applicants. Teen-age boys milled around in the corridors, passing along the latest rumours.

"They say they only accept orphans."

"They're only taking boys from Moscow."

"They won't even look at your application if you have a single 'C' on your report card."

The last rumour was nearly true, for those who had "C's" were handed back their applications.

Tonya, who was a born Muscovite, quickly got her bearings. "Keep your chin up, Yura. We'll get you in. You have a straight 'A' average, and don't you believe they're only taking boys from Moscow."

Indeed, when the board members looked at his report card they told him to prepare for the exams. There were to be four: Russian grammar, a composition, literature and arithmetic.

"However, don't expect a place in the dormitory," the secretary warned. "There are no vacancies."

At least they had said he could take the exams. However, after I figured out how much room and board with a private family would cost, I saw that Yura would probably have to give up his dream of entering a trade school that year. I told Aunt Pasha about it in the evening. She became very cross and said, "Yura will live with us. The main thing now is for him to prepare for his exams."

There were three days left till the first one. The house was unusually still. We all tiptoed around and spoke in muted tones. Aunt Pasha would go over to Yura from time to time and take away his books. "Go out and get some fresh air. You can come back in half an hour," she would say.

I shall never forget the care and attention Yura received in their home. Finally, the day of the first exam dawned.

"Good luck, Yura!" we all said.

He was the fourth to be called on. Tonya and I waited anxiously in the corridor outside the classroom.

"They'll flunk him. Look at these Moscow boys. Yura's nowheres like them."

Tonya was much more optimistic. "He'll pass. I got to know him, and he's no shy lamb. And don't forget he knows the subject."

When Yura emerged his cheeks were flaming. One of the examiners accompanied him. "Show me where your relatives are," he was saying. He was an athletic-looking man in his forties. When they came up to us he smiled and said, "Yura has an excellent knowledge of grammar. We asked him several questions that were not in the book, just to see what he would say, and he came through with flying colours. We actually enjoyed testing him. We'll expect you for the next examination. Good luck, Yura."

I think my brother was the happiest boy in the world that day. When a worried Aunt Pasha opened the door Yura threw his arms around her neck and exclaimed, "I got an 'A'!"

"You'll choke me, Yura!" she said and laughed with relief.

"I was really scared at first, but the questions were all easy. I didn't feel a bit scared after that."

That same day our cousins got theatre tickets and we all went off to celebrate Yura's first "A".

Soon the days I had taken off from my job came to an end. I set out for Gzhatsk, loaded down with presents for the family from our wonderful aunt and thinking about how generous our Moscow relatives were. After all, they had a very modest income and a very modest home, but they had received us royally. I also hoped that Yura would pass his other exams as well as he had the first. On the whole, I was not worried about him, for I had left him in the care of our aunt and uncle.

Back in Gzhatsk I walked down the street towards our house, wondering what the family was doing. Probably worrying about us in Moscow.

Mother, Father and Boris were in the garden, picking cucumbers. They all turned the moment the gate creaked.

"Well? How are things?" Father asked.

"Everything's fine."

I told them in a thousand details which I never would have remembered if not for their questions of our ordeal and successes in the capital, the most important of which was Yura's first exam.

"You say he got an 'A'?" Father said, throwing back his shoulders and glancing at Boris sternly. "That means he remembers what I told him and doesn't want to disgrace the family name."

Mother was just as pleased, though I could see she had not really accepted the fact that Yura had left home. She was most pleased by the warm reception Yura had received in our relatives' home.

Boris commented on my story by saying, "Nobody asked Tonya to go all the way out to Lyubertsy. That wasn't any of her business."

"Be still!" Father snapped. "Is that the way you'd repay kindness?"

Several days later the postman stopped by our house. "Your impatient young man's decided to brighten his parents' day with a letter."

Yura wrote that he had got "A's" in his other exams as well, but had not been assigned to the group of lathe-operators or fitters, as he had hoped to be, since he lacked a year's schooling. He was going to be a founder. "It's a very interesting trade," he wrote. "The statue of Pushkin in Moscow was cast by founders."

We also learned that he had been given his school uniform and that he had had his picture taken in it and would send it in the next letter. Most important of all, he had been given lodgings in the dormitory on the basis of his excellent marks.

One evening Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov dropped in for a visit. Father showed him Yura's letter.

"Well, the ranks of the working class are increasing," the teacher said. "I never doubted that he would get good marks. I'm very glad for his sake. Give Yuri Gagarin my regards."

This was the first time anyone had referred to him respectfully by his full name, and it sounded strange to us.

When someone that is close to you leaves home, not for a day or two, but for years, it is very difficult to get used to his absence. We had said goodbye to Yura and then had suddenly discovered just how much he had meant to each of us. Each one of us missed him terribly.

Boris was visibly unhappy. The difference of only two years in their ages had made the brothers comrades who shared the same secrets from their schoolmates, friends and parents. Besides, life was never dull with Yura around. He read a lot and knew a lot. He was always a ringleader in their games and whenever Boris was in danger of being beaten, his big brother would always stand up for him.

After Yura's departure Father became more thoughtful, more quiet and, as improbable as it seems, more gentle and compassionate. Indeed, it was still difficult to argue with him and useless to disagree with him, for he would rarely concede a point. Still, he was a changed man.

As for Mother, she felt his absence more keenly than any of us. Yura would be on her mind all day long. We noticed that she would tell us about her dreams if she dreamed of him and would wonder whether this was a good or evil omen.

I, too, missed him.

As we'd sit around in the evenings the conversation would invariably turn to Yura. We would recall his childish pranks and look fondly upon them from a distance, amazed that he had been punished or scolded for them. His absence served to smooth over old conflicts.

The postman became our most eagerly awaited visitor. Happily, Yura was a diligent correspondent. One should have seen our parents reading and rereading his every letter and then discussing every word in them.

A trade school pupil received a salary of thirty rubles a month which, in the old currency, was only pocket money. Yura sent home half of his first pay.

"Sign here, Anna Timofeyevna," the postman said to Mother. "Congratulations. I see your son is earning his own living now."

Mother signed the slip. Then, after the postman had counted out the sum in one-ruble bills to make it seem more impressive, she burst into tears.

"What are you crying about?" Father muttered. "If he's sent you the money it means he has enough to live on. After all,

they feed and clothe him there. I'll go get us a bottle to celebrate."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" Mother cried indignantly. Then she sobbed, "It's because his childhood has ended."

Yura wrote often. How sorry I am that we did not save his letters. Now, with just the few that have somehow survived, but mostly from recollections, we have recreated the past.

For instance, Yura wrote that he liked the work in the hot foundry very much. He spoke with enthusiasm of his teacher, Nikolai Kripov, an experienced foundry worker, and told us about his friends at the trade school and of their dormitory life.

"Just think, there are fifteen boys in a room. It must be awfully crowded," Mother said and sighed.

"What's wrong with that? Let him get used to living with other people. He's a good fellow and will get along with them," Father replied.

We soon received a photograph of Yura amidst a group of his friends. The boys were all wearing greatcoats with shiny metal buttons. Their caps were tilted at a dashing angle, and each bore the emblem of the young working class: a pair of crossed hammers.

Boris sighed enviously and said, "Yura looks just like an officer."

"Wouldn't you like to be there? If you do better at school you can be just like him," Zoya retorted.

From that day on Boris became a much better student than he had ever been. He did not try to get along without doing his homework and began reading more. His "D's" and wobbly "C's" were soon replaced by good marks. Yura was indeed a good example to him.

I recall a letter we received soon before New Year's. In it Yura wrote excitedly that he had joined the Komsomol. In another letter he wrote that he and a group of his friends had enrolled in the seventh grade of a local evening school.

Yura and I parted in Moscow in August 1949. We were not to live under the same roof again in the remaining eighteen years of his life, keeping in touch by mail, speaking over the telephone and meeting during our vacations or during some family anniversary.

That is why the following pages will not be a complete story of Yura's life. I shall only write of what I witnessed myself or what I learned from my parents, brother and sister.

Chapter 7

A WORKING MAN

The three families, our parents and Boris, Zoya and Dmitry and their children, and Masha and I were preparing to celebrate Yura's first home leave. I said "three families", but this is not correct. Though Zoya and I were both grown and had children of our own, and I lived in my own house, we still considered ourselves to be a single family and still gathered under our parents' roof not only on holidays, but constantly on weekdays as well.

Now, after we had all hugged and kissed Yura, the women went off to the kitchen to prepare the festive supper while we men remained outside on the porch to have a smoke and talk of something unimportant but very necessary.

"Show me your hands to begin with, son."

Yura smiled broadly as he held his hands out for his father's inspection. Father probed at Yura's palms with his finger, felt the hard callouses and said approvingly, "That's just the kind you get from swinging an axe. I can see you haven't been fooling around. You're getting to be a regular working man."

It was a quiet evening. Soft lights were going on in the houses across the street. Yura took off his greatcoat and his cap and laid them over the porch railing. Then he ran a comb through his hair which had grown considerably.

"It's good to be home," he said.

Father looked at him critically. He seemed to like what he saw, for there was not a single unnecessary crease in Yura's regulation shirt. "Boris was right. You do look like an officer."

"You'll catch cold, Yura," I said.

"No, I won't. What do you think I take a cold shower for every morning? And why don't you quit smoking, Valya? It won't do you any good, you know."

I turned to see if Masha could hear him. Here was an ally for her. She and Mother were at me day and night to give up smoking. Dad was my sole support, for I couldn't imagine him without a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He grew and blended the rough tobacco himself, and I must say it was as strong as hell.

"So you say you missed your old home?"

"I sure did. I'd love to go fishing."

"Never forget, son, there's no place like home." Though

Father had apparently reconciled himself to Yura's having left home, it was a hard pill for him to swallow. Now his son's wistful words warmed his soul.

The women called us inside. When we had noisily taken our places round the table, Zoya asked Yura to tell us about the trade school. At first he tried to get out of it, saying he had only been there a few months and didn't really know the place yet, but he soon got carried away. We then realised how truly magnificent life was for those trade school pupils. The classrooms were spotless, the workers at the plant were very attentive and the pupils were fed four meals a day. There was a sports stadium nearby and every last one of them, not just those who volunteered, had to participate in some field of sports. That was understandable, for a working man had to be strong.

Mother listened to Yura's excited words and sighed, "You're stuck fast to that life now, Yura. You'll never come back to Gzhatsk, son. You're stuck fast for good."

"I don't know where they'll send me when I graduate, Ma. They don't have plants like that here yet. I felt awful when they wouldn't let me be a fitter, but when I saw the foundry.... Boy! I'd never trade that for any other job."

Father, who had had one too many, now raised a finger. "I'll tell you this, son. Any job is interesting if it's to your liking, if you understand what it's all about and put your heart into it. But if it hasn't got you, drop it and look for something else. Something that's to your liking."

"That's enough."

"Wait a bit, Mother. I want them to hear this. They haven't done right by me, neither Valya nor Yura. Neither of them followed my trade. I learned it from my father. Boris here will also run off like them so's not to be a carpenter. No, they haven't done right by me. But I'll forget it if they turn out to be good workers. Nothing'll ever come of a man who doesn't have his heart in his job. So I'll see what you'll amount to. Got that, Yura?"

"Yes."

"Well, let's have a drop together then. You're a working man now, and independent. You're big enough to drink now."

Mother glanced worriedly at Father, then looked at Yura. He smiled, picked up his drink and touched his father's glass. "Here's good health to you, Dad. Don't be mad, but I'm not going to drink this. I told you I'm active in sports." He set his glass back on the table.

Strangely, Father was not offended. On the contrary, he said, "Look at him, Mother! The boy hasn't got spoiled living with strangers."

The next morning, after everyone had left, Mother and Yura stayed on at home. Yura sat reading at the table, leaning his chin on his hands. The pages rustled softly. Mother sat nearby knitting. She was making him a pair of mittens. She didn't know what clothes he would be issued at the school. Winter was just around the corner, with the nights already frosty. Besides, hand-knitted mittens and socks were always warmer and lasted longer than factory-made ones. Her needles clicked rapidly.

Children were shouting outside. They had been let out of school early on account of the November holidays and were happy to be free. They could hear Boris shouting and ordering someone about. The poor boy sounded hoarse from all the noise he was making.

"Why don't you rest a while, son?"

"All right." Another half hour passed while he read on.

Mother watched him from the corner of her eye and sighed inaudibly. No matter how good the food was there he had lost weight. His cheekbones protruded, his eyes seemed sunken and there were dark rings under them. Perhaps it was because his job in the foundry kept him constantly near fire. Fire took the strength out of a person. Or was it because he was forever reading? He'd tuck a book under his pillow when he went to sleep and had his nose in it when he woke up.

Mother spoke again. "Go out for a walk, Yura. Get some fresh air. And go to see your friends. They'll be hurt if you don't see them."

Yura raised his head reluctantly. "All right. I'll go out. Just don't worry. Nothing will happen to me. You're forever reading yourself."

"We're not talking about me. When I was younger I really did read a lot." There was regret in her voice. Was it because her youth had passed, or because she could no longer read the way she once had? "I'd often steal an hour or two at night to read, but I can't do that any more. I don't have the energy I once did, and my eyes tire quickly."

Yura went out into the passage. He was back in a minute. "I'd rather go to the movies tonight. I can see all the fellows there. Want me to read to you? You know what this book is

about? It's about Frunze. Every fellow at school read it. I'll tell you the beginning. When Frunze was locked up in a cell in a tsarist prison they took his comrades off to be executed every morning and they passed by his cell. He'd been sentenced to death, too. Still he was studying foreign languages in prison. He decided they'd come in handy. A man could escape from prison, but foreign languages might come in handy in their revolutionary work. That's as far as I got."

He began reading softly, but could not contain his emotions. His tense voice rang now with sorrow for the fate of the condemned revolutionaries, now with anger and hatred for their executioners. Mother set aside her knitting and listened.

The door creaked. Boris stood on the threshold. Yura held up his finger to warn him to be still. His brother sat down on the bench by the door, listening intently. Mother turned on the lamp quietly.

When Yura had finished reading the last page he said, "See what sort of people they were, Ma? I really never knew about them before. There was Frunze and other revolutionaries like Artem and Voroshilov...."

"Where d'you get books like that?" Boris asked. There was a note of envy in his voice.

"In the library. Where else? You try dropping by there more often."

Mother noticed that Boris was wearing Yura's school cap. "That's why he didn't go out for a walk," she said to herself. "Boris borrowed his cap. He's been wearing it all day."

"How could you have done such a thing!" she scolded Boris. "Yura's been stuck indoors since morning."

"I just wanted to try it on, and then I forgot I was wearing it."

"Don't scold him, Ma." Yura walked up to her and looked into her eyes as he said, "I wouldn't have gone out anyway. I've been wanting to read you this book, but I never got around to it."

It was usually difficult to draw Father into a conversation. There had not been much happiness in his life, and what good was there in stirring up old sorrows? He was a silent man and smiled rarely.

When the family gathered in our old house that evening everyone was feeling a bit sad, for Yura would be leaving for school the next day. Father suddenly had a yen to talk to his sons of his younger days. Indeed, he was in a talkative mood that evening.

"I don't mean to reproach you, boys, but I will say that you have a much easier life than we did when we were young. You can't even compare things. I never did get a chance to get an education, you know."

"You should have gone to school," Boris interrupted.

Father was in a good mood and so continued, "Sit still and listen. You know how I went to school? I worked hard all summer and all autumn, too. I was a shepherd. The other boys from richer families were all at school, learning their ABC's, but I was busy cracking a whip. When it started to snow and the frost set in the cows and sheep were penned for the winter. Then it was my turn to go to school. But think of how much I'd missed by then and how much I had to learn to catch up with the others.

"Well, then. I was born with a head on my shoulders, and the teacher felt sorry for me. He helped me as much as he could. He had TB and was as poor as a churchmouse. As soon as he'd help me catch up with the rest of the class, spring would set in. I'd have to leave school again, take up my shepherd's bag and go off to the meadows to tend the herd. We had a big family. There were eight of us children, six boys and two girls. Only five of us survived. My father, Ivan Gagarin, was from Kostroma Region. But he had been a soldier for many years, and when he was demobilised he stayed on in Gzhatsk, where his regiment had been stationed. He was a good carpenter and cabinet-maker. He had no money for lumber, so he pulled up the floor boards and used them to make a fine set of furniture. It was really beautiful. Buyers came from all over. They snatched the pieces from each other. He should have got a good price for the set, but he didn't like to bargain. He didn't get much. Just enough to buy a few kilos of bread-rings, lay down a new floor and have a bit left over to keep us going. By the way, he nicknamed me 'Gunner', because I looked like him and he'd been a gunner. Well then.... How long do you think the money lasted? It was a hungry life. Such terrible poverty. We moved from Gzhatsk to Klushino Village, where he bought a tumbledown hut. My father thought that things would not be as bad in the village. But they were worse. We were penniless. Father began drinking. Then he started beating Mother. We got our share, too. He'd chase us out of the house. Then one day he left home. He said he was going to Bologoye to find work. That was the last we ever saw of him. Someone told my mother he'd been killed by a train. I was only four years old then."

It was very still in the house. Yura had put his book aside. I knew what a cheerless childhood Father had had, but this was the first time Yura, or Boris had heard him speak of it. Both of them were flushed with emotion.

"How long were you at school?" Yura asked.

"Just two winters, son. It wasn't that I was so dumb I had to leave, but just that we were so poor. Besides, I got a raw deal there."

Father told us that one day an inspector came to their school. The teacher was anxious to impress upon him the fact that he was earning his misery salary. He called upon the son of the richest man in the village. The boy was very bright and truly the best pupil in the class. The chalk tapped confidently on the blackboard as he worked quickly on a sum in arithmetic. Suddenly he stopped. He had made a mistake. But he could not find it, either from nervousness or because he was usually so self-confident.

The teacher, meanwhile, had been watching the inspector's expression instead of watching the boy and so did not at once see what was wrong. Alexei Gagarin rose and pointed out the mistake.

"What do you know," the inspector said as he sized up the poor shepherd boy. "He's got a head on his shoulders, he has. Come up to the board, boy."

Alexei went up front, his bast shoes creaking. There, to the genuine surprise of his teacher, who had not expected such quickness, he easily solved another sum for the inspector. The visiting official seemed pleased at the poor boy's success and did not mind ruffling Alexei's curls.

"The boy has brains. Study on, my young friend," he said and then recited a line from a poem with great emphasis: "This is the glorious way of many." Then, to the envy of every other child and the embarrassment of the best pupil, he gave Alexei a real lead pencil which was a great treasure in those days.

After school was out the happy teacher caught up with Alexei, who was still speechless from joy, and said, "Thanks, Gagarin. You saved the day for me."

At home, he told his mother of the great event. She, however, burst into tears. "There's sure to be trouble. Even good luck won't bring poor people happiness."

She certainly knew what she was talking about. As Alexei flew off to school in high spirits the next morning he was accosted by the best pupil's two elder brothers. They were

waiting for him at the edge of the village. Both were in their late teens.

"Are you Lomonosov?" * one of them asked, blocking the way.

"You're fooling. You know I'm Gagarin," the boy replied in a frightened voice, sensing that they would give him a beating and that there was no chance of escape. How could he escape from such big boys?

"I think you are Lomonosov," the youth insisted. Alexei had never heard the strange name before. Then the fellow hit him. They beat him mercilessly, repeating with each blow, "Tend the cows. You'll never go near the schoolhouse again."

Alexei was mad at the whole world, and especially at the kind inspector. If not for him he would never have got a beating. As for the schoolhouse, he never went near it after that. His mother did not protest. If he preferred to tend the herd that was all right with her. Moreover, it brought in a little money.

"Did you ever see them again, Daddy?" Boris asked when Father had ended his story. "You know, the fellows, who beat you?"

"Sure I did. Remember, we lived in the same village."

"You should have shot them dead."

"What with? My shepherd's whip?"

"No. I mean during the revolution."

"They ran away during the revolution, son."

"Don't be silly, Boris," Yura interrupted. "What do you think a revolution is all about? Shooting everyone? That's not what revolutions are for."

"What are they for?"

Yura stopped to think. "They're so everyone can go to school," he said after a pause. "And so nobody will be lazy. I'll give you a book to read about Lenin. You'll understand everything after you've read it." He rose, went over to his bed and pulled his suitcase from under it. "Here, read this," he said, handing Boris a big book.

When Yura opened his suitcase I saw that it was full of books and wondered how he had managed to carry such a load all the way from the station.

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* Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765), a great Russian scholar and scientist, whose discoveries enriched many fields of endeavour, came from a poor fisherman's family.

I recalled this evening and Father's story in great detail when we were suddenly confronted with a host of newly found high-born "relatives" abroad. This is how it all came about. Immediately after Yura's spaceflight the foreign press published a great many interviews with the descendants of a noble Russian family named Gagarin who had lived in the USA ever since the revolution. These American Gagarins claimed that Yura was either a third cousin or some other relation.

At the press-conference held after Yura's return from his spaceflight he began his talk with a public denial of being related to these people. I think that at the time he was thinking of his childhood, of Mother's stories about Grandfather Timofei and Father's stories about our other grandfather, the skilled cabinet-maker Ivan Gagarin.

No, there were never any princes in our family.

However, we do have relatives we are very proud of. I would like to say a few words about Maria Dyukova, Mother's elder sister. She is now seventy years old and lives in Mytishchi near Moscow. Yura often visited our aunt when he was studying at the trade school.

Aunt Masha recalls those years well. I went to see her recently and this is what she told me about Yura.

"He was a very orderly boy and was always neatly dressed. He would usually come on a Saturday, with a little bundle wrapped in paper under his arm. "Would you wash my shirt, Aunt Masha? If it isn't too much trouble?"

"I don't believe in giving children money. It spoils them. But those were difficult times and food was scarce. I was sorry for Yura for living so far from home. I'd give him a little something and tell him to buy himself a bun or a bottle of milk whenever he felt like it. But later I discovered that he hadn't spent any of the money. He had saved it to buy the family presents when he went home on leave.

"He always asked questions about the past and wanted to know all about Grandfather Timofei and Uncle Seryozha and of our life in Petrograd before the revolution.

"You know we come from a working-class family. I started working when I was thirteen, when World War I broke out. I worked at the Khosin and Munshak munitions plant as a solderer. We made hand grenades.

"I recall I once mentioned the fact that I had seen Lenin and

had even spoken with him. Yura just couldn't believe it. 'What's so strange about that, Yura?' I asked. 'I'm sure all of us Petrograd workers saw Lenin.'

"He was at me in a flash. 'Tell me all about it, Aunt Masha. Please.'

"There really wasn't anything unusual about it. The forces of General Yudenich were advancing on Petrograd then. All the workers rose up to defend the city, volunteering for the Red Guard. We factory girls organised a first-aid unit. Our unit was summoned to the Smolny just before we were to leave for the front lines.

"When they show the Smolny in the movies it looks just as it did then, with huge crowds of people all around. There were soldiers and sailors and workers from the factories and plants. They were armed with rifles or grenades. Some had knapsacks over their shoulders and carried tea kettles.

"We went up to the second floor and saw Lenin there. He was sitting at his desk, signing papers. We could see how busy he was.

"Then someone told him that the girls of the first-aid unit had arrived. He got up, walked over quickly and greeted us. We had on our white kerchiefs with red crosses and carried first-aid kits.

"'Aren't you afraid to go off to the front lines, girls?' he asked.

"To tell the truth, we were a bit scared, but we were too embarrassed to admit it to Lenin, and so we all shouted, 'No, we're not!'

"'That's fine,' he said. 'I can see you are brave working-class girls. You must try your best to help our men defeat the tsarist general. As soon as the war is over we'll send all of you to school.'

"We left for the front lines straight from the Smolny. I told all this to Yura and had no idea what I was letting myself in for. He showered me with questions: 'What was Lenin like?','How was he dressed?', 'What was his expression like?', 'How did he speak?', 'Did he resemble his portraits?'

"He wanted to know every last detail and wouldn't be satisfied with less. However, it didn't end there. The next Saturday there was a great commotion outside my door. Goodness, when I opened it I saw a dozen boys. Yura'd brought all his friends along. 'They want to hear all about Lenin, Aunt Masha,' he said.

"Well, company was company. When I had them all settled I

told them about Lenin, and about the time I met Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya and what we talked about.

"Yura never forgot about me. Not when he was through with his studies and grew up, or after he'd come back from his spaceflight. He always looked in on us. And he'd never come visiting without a present. 'What is an old lady like me going to do with this lovely material?' I'd say. 'A new dress will make you look younger, Aunt Masha. Wear it in good health,' he'd reply. Or else he'd bring back some strange gadget from abroad, and half the time I wouldn't even know what to do with it."

Yura stayed on at home for three or four days. He had a noisy send-off, with his former classmates coming along to the station. Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov was the centre of a merry, shouting crowd.

As Bespalov shook his former pupil's hand in parting he asked with noticeable sadness, "Is your interest in aviation safely ended, Yura?"

"Oh, no! As soon as I graduate from trade school I'll start working at the plant and I'll enroll in a correspondence course. Then, after I graduate from secondary school, I'll go on to college. I want to be an aviation engineer. And I'm going to fly, too."

As the train pulled out of the station a band of boys stood waving their hats.

When Yura's second year at the trade school was drawing to a close we received a very unexpected letter from him. He wrote that since he was good at athletics he had been offered a chance to go to a physical training technical school in Leningrad and that he had already passed the elimination trials in Mytishchi.

The letter both disappointed and upset us.

Mother sat down to write a reply. "Don't you think you're making a big mistake, son? You can take part in sports everywhere," she wrote. However, she never finished it, for the postman soon delivered another letter from Yura. In it he wrote that he had given up the idea and was going to Saratov instead, to study at an industrial technical school, where he would have a chance to advance in his field. The board of the trade school was sending him on to continue his studies, since he had received a straight "A" average.

Naturally, no one could object to the Saratov industrial school.

Chapter 8

EARTH AND SKY

I recall Yura's visit home the summer he completed his junior year at the technical school. I simply could not recognise him. His shoulders were broader, his body more firm, and his face was darkly tanned after a summer spent outdoors. His angular boyishness was gone. He had become more composed, and his movements were more measured. No, he was not a boy any longer.

"Is it really you, Yura?"

He laughed.

Perhaps his suit was responsible for the impression he made. It was light with a small check and fit perfectly. He also had on a new pair of shoes and a new watch. All during the previous five years we had become accustomed to seeing Yura in uniform: first as a trade school pupil and then as an industrial technical school pupil. He looked definitely civilian now.

"You've filled out. Why, you'll soon look like a regular merchant. You'll have all the girls at your beck and call."

He laughed again. His smile was broad and generous, bringing his lips, eyes, cheeks and nose into motion. This was his old smile. This was our own Yura Gagarin.

"I bought it all with my own money," he said, touching the lapel of his jacket.

"Quit lying. I'll bet you robbed someone in a dark alley. Look at those bulging muscles of yours."

In all his twenty years Yura had never had any decent clothes with the exception of his school uniforms. It was a good feeling to be wearing something that was new and fit well and had been purchased with money he had earned. This added to his feeling of self-confidence.

I felt a small pang of envy. When I was twenty the only clothes I owned were an army shirt and pants. I had certainly possessed my own share of self-confidence then, bolstered by the heavy armour of our tank.

Yura told me of how he had earned the money. The secretary of the district YCL committee had met him at the local opera late that spring. The performance that evening had been Dargomyzhsky's "Mermaid".

"I've seen you here before, Gagarin. You seem to be a regular," the secretary said and laid a hand on Yura's shoulder. "But why are you always in uniform? You'd look better here if you had on a suit."

Yura shrugged with embarrassment. He had longed to buy himself a suit, but he was not earning any money yet.

"I see," the secretary said. He was a resourceful fellow and sought Yura out during the next intermission. "If you want to buy some clothes, Gagarin, I'd suggest you take a job in a summer camp as a PT instructor for a children's home. I want to warn you, though, that the kids there are a wild bunch. But I'm sure you'll manage them. Well?"

"Fine."

And so he went off to camp with them.

"How did you manage?" I asked.

Yura laughed again. "We hit it off right from the start. To tell you the truth, I fell in love with the lot of them. They're a wonderful bunch of devils. Real bandits, you know. There's never a dull moment with kids like that. I got them to sing. We'd make a huge bonfire every evening and sit around it, singing songs. We had a blind accordionist. His name was Ivan Alexeyevich. Just listening to him play brought a lump to your throat. The songs were all wartime songs about partisans and sailors, or old ones like 'Varyag'. The kids sang away till I thought their lungs would burst. Then there were sports like soccer and volleyball. Don't forget I was the PT instructor. But the main point, Valya, was that I'd read up on books about the war so that I'd have a lot of interesting stories to tell them. That works wonders as far as discipline goes." He cocked an eye at me and said, "By the way, do you remember a conversation about a captain named Tushin?"

I shrugged and said, "I might have heard the name someplace."

"I'll give you a hint. Remember when you first took me to Moscow there was a man with a moustache sitting next to us in the train?"

"What about him?"

"He was the one who told us about Captain Tushin. I've brought you a present. It's *War and Peace* by Lev Tolstoy."

"What has Tolstoy got to do with it?"

"You'll find out after you've read it."

We usually received two or three long, informative letters a week from Yura when he was in his last year at the technical school. This was a time of field work for him, a time when he travelled around to many cities. There were so many new

impressions he simply had to share with someone. Actually, these letters were more like a diary.

I recall one about his group's trip to Moscow and their work at the Voikov Plant. He described everything in great detail.

However, his letters from Leningrad were the most vivid of all. We read them aloud when the whole family was gathered round. It was as if we, too, had seen the streets, avenues, bridges and palaces of Leningrad. Mother, especially, was overjoyed by these letters, for that was where she had grown up.

When their training period in Leningrad was over the pupils returned to Saratov. Yura was a member of the school's Physics Club, led by Nikolai Ivanovich Moskvin, a magnificent teacher. Upon his return he read a paper entitled "Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and His Teachings on Reaction Engines and Interplanetary Flights."

As always, physics was still his favourite subject. Yura later said that reading the works of Tsiolkovsky changed his outlook completely. He felt that perhaps one day man might conquer space, and that even the new jets that had replaced the old propeller-driven planes were not the limit of man's searching mind.

Yura began reading books on science and science-fiction and for a while set aside fiction completely. He never missed a single article in the newspapers or magazines on rocket production, including military rocket development. He was trying also to understand Einstein's theory of relativity. These studies took up all of his free time, of which there was so little. He had to prepare for his final exams and write his final report, which called for a great number of charts and included a long reading list. His theme was casting production.

I knew of all this from Yura's letters. I could guess that he was driving himself hard and sleeping in snatches. One had to have a tight schedule and an iron constitution to carry such a load.

Yura was wondering then whether his generation would live to see a manned spaceflight. He had no way of knowing that he had already taken the first step in that direction.

The summer of 1955 was a hot one. It promised a good harvest.

Yura's letters home always brought joy to the family. He had passed all his exams and graduated with 32 "A's" and one "B"

in psychology for the four-year course. "The 'B' is for a change," he wrote. "Otherwise my report card looks too dull." He was now a technician in the field of casting production.

"Well, he's done killing himself with his studies," Father said and sighed contentedly. "That's enough of that for a while. It's time he started earning his keep, repaying the country for all that learning."

"I wonder where they'll send him," Mother said and there was a trace of anxiety in her voice.

"No matter where they do, it'll still be in his own country. Personally, I think he'll be living in a big city," Father reasoned, "since his trade is a city trade. There's nothing for him to do in a village."

In June we received another letter from Yura with a clipping from the Saratov Komsomol paper *Zarya Molodezhi* inside. There was a picture of Yura sitting in the cockpit of a YAK-18 training plane. He had on a flyer's helmet and goggles and was waving. The accompanying text was headed "A Day at the Airfield" and read, in part:

"There's a large programme scheduled for today. Some trainees will practise take-offs and others landing, while still others will learn some flying tricks.

"Yura Gagarin, a Komsomol member and a pupil of the industrial technical school, will take off on his first solo flight. The young man seemed a bit nervous, but his movements were confident and precise. He examined the cockpit and instrument panel closely before the flight and only then did he taxi out to the runway.

"Gagarin raised his right hand, asking for permission to take off.

"'Permission granted,' K. M. Puchik, the flight instructor, radioed.

"One after another the planes soared into the sky. As the instructor watched his fledglings he could not refrain from praise."

We knew from his letters that Yura had joined a flying club in his senior year at school but did not take this seriously. The flying club, the books on aviation and all the talk on the subject seemed remote and unreal, like the game of flying model planes which Yura and his chums had played when he had been at school.

However, here was the clipping. Father grunted and said, "He's outfoxed me again. Where'd he get that stubborn streak?" Then he folded the clipping carefully and put it in his breast pocket.

"You'll use it for cigarette paper by mistake," Mother said.

"What do you think I am?" Then he looked away and said in some embarrassment, "I'll show it to my friends. After all, Yura's flown a plane."

Chapter 9

BEFORE THE TAKE-OFF

Every time Yura came home on a visit we'd manage to go fishing. This time, however, luck was not with us. The fish were not biting.

We lay there on the hot sand, drowsy from the unusually warm August sun, watching our floats lazily. The goose-feather and cork floats swayed imperceptibly on the slow ripples. The water was so clean and clear that not even the light shadow cast upon it by the willows on the bank could conceal the hooks and bait or the flat bottom covered with clam shells.

White clouds drifted over the Gzhat River. Their weightless reflections, encountering no barriers, slipped smoothly along the river, pierced through by the sun's rays.

We had promised to bring back enough fish for soup and for frying. To our great disappointment, however, we had not had a single bite. The heat was overpowering and we had neither the strength nor the desire to work up steam over our bad luck.

"Tell us an interesting story, Yura," Boris said.

"What about?" Yura replied lazily.

"About flying. And about your plane."

Our "middle" brother came to life, sat up and hugged his knees as he said, "You're both landlubbers. That won't be interesting."

"Don't be so snooty," I said. "There's no need to be stuck-up. If you're the only one of us that's learned to fly, you can tell us about it."

He squinted, trying to think of a way to begin, and then said, "All right. I'll tell you about something that happened to me. But it's not about flying. It's about parachute jumping. About my first jump."

Two dozen girls and youths, many of whom knew each other from the technical school or the flying club, were riding a bus through the dark streets of Saratov, heading for the airfield. At the crack of dawn they would all experience their first jump. Both the day before and the day before that they had made the same journey, but the jumping had been called off because of foul weather.

The boys sat there silently, lost in thought. The girls, on the contrary, whispered and giggled, teasing the boys. A pert blonde with a ponytail hairdo, a short, tight skirt and lips painted a bright crimson, attracted everyone's attention.

"Look at him, isn't he unsociable?" she said, pointing at Yura. "He's probably jumped a hundred times. You'd think he was a Master of Sports."

"I'm not. This is my first jump, too," he replied in a low voice, not wanting to keep up the conversation.

"Oh? Your very first jump? I'll bet you're scared stiff!"

"Don't you think you're something! Mazikha," Yura thought, insulted by her taunt.

"Go on, admit it," she persisted. "You're scared, but you're trying not to show it, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm scared but I'm trying not to show it," he replied readily.

"Well, I'm not the tiniest bit scared. Not even this much," she said, measuring off a bit of the little nail on her pinky.

Dmitry Martianov, their instructor, jumped first. He landed gracefully and precisely, with the lot of them looking on in awe. He folded his parachute quickly and deftly. The next moment he commanded, "Gagarin, you're first!"

Yura headed towards the plane as one in a trance. He was walking on air when he suddenly became aware of the weight of the two parachutes he carried, one on his chest and one on his back. "There's still time to back out," a cowardly voice inside him whispered.

"Good luck!" he heard the saucy girl call out.

The small training plane taxied down the field and was airborne. Yura had never been in a plane before. If only he didn't have to jump he could enjoy the marvelous view of the city and the Volga below. However, if he didn't jump he would not be allowed to take flying lessons. The pilot raised his hand. It was time to jump.

Yura scraped against something as he climbed out onto the wing. The earth rushed up at him, concave, divided into blue,

black and green squares and quadrangles, and then dropped away beneath the wing.

"Come on, you can do it!" the pilot shouted. "The girls are all waiting to hand you bouquets. Ready?"

"Ready!" Yura replied automatically.

"Go on!"

His soles scratched on the wing as a blast of cold wind slapped against his face. He felt he was dropping, dropping and the chute wouldn't open. His fingers searched frantically for the ring of the emergency chute and couldn't find it. Meanwhile, the earth was rushing up at breakneck speed.

He didn't have time to panic, for his body was jolted as the main chute on his back flew open. His fall was broken and he began floating down.

"Not bad for the first time," the instructor said. "At any rate, you didn't resemble a sack of potatoes." Martianov's praise was highly valued. He was a former fighter pilot and often repeated that flying was only for the bold and the brave.

"Can I jump again?" Yura said excitedly.

"Cool off. Don't be in such a rush," Martianov replied. "Can't you see there's a waiting line? They're all anxious to get up in the sky, especially this pretty girl."

The "pretty girl" was the saucy blonde. She was the next to go up. However, her nerve failed her and the pilot brought her down again.

There was some laughter and teasing, but Yura, who was still under the spell of his own jump, felt sorry for her. He went over to her and said, "Don't feel too bad. I was awfully scared, too. You know, I thought about you when I got out onto the wing. Maybe that's what made me jump. You'll make it next time."

"No, thank you! I'll never come back here again."

However, she did return, but her insolent "Mazikha" look was gone forever. Suddenly everyone took a liking to her. The boys discovered she came from a simple, hard-working family and realised her arrogance had been caused by a silly desire to seem worldly. The next time she went up she jumped.

The pilot had told Yura that the girls would be waiting for him with bouquets. And they were. The blonde girl was the one to hand him a bouquet. But this was much later, after his first solo flight, the one the Saratov youth paper had written up.

Boris drew his own conclusions from Yura's story. "Are you in love with her?" he asked point-blank.

"No, I'm not. And she's in love with someone else. He's a very nice guy, by the way." He chuckled and added, "My opinion of her wasn't much at first, but she turned out to be a very nice person. Lots of the fellows dropped out. They didn't have the guts to jump and fly. Especially those who'd been spoiled at home and never knew what hardship meant. But she didn't get scared. I respect people like that. She was the one who ought to have got the flowers, not me. I just didn't have enough sense to give her any."

We were too engrossed in our conversation to realise that it was getting late and that the weather had taken a sharp change for the worse. The fluffy white clouds were gone. Now the sky was overcast with dark, heavy rain clouds. The sand under us had gotten much colder. Then it began to rain. Boris shivered, got up and began pulling on his clothes. We followed suit.

"We might as well go home. The fish aren't biting anyway," I said.

Boris went off to collect the tackle. A second later we heard him howl. We turned and saw him leap and grab hold of one of the rods that was stuck in the sand. A large chub swung in a graceful, silvery arc and landed with a slap at his heels.

What a catch!

We forgot all about the pouring rain and dashed for our rods. It was a miracle indeed. All our floats were bobbing wildly, waiting for us to pull in our catch.

"Ah, I got you this time!"

"Look at this whale!"

"Wow!"

Excitement filled the air. We barely had time to bait our hooks before we had another bite. The creel we had brought along was much too small, and so we strung the fish on a long willow switch.

Though we were soaked to the skin we felt hot. Nothing could have made us leave then. Nothing except the fact that we suddenly ran out of bait.

"That's all, gentlemen," I said. "Let's leave some here to multiply."

"That's strange, isn't it? First the weather turned foul and then the fish began to bite. Let's write to the *Sporting Fisherman* and ask them why. Or maybe one of us is simply very lucky," Yura said. He winked at me slyly and crept up on Boris, who was standing in the shallows, pulling in his line. Yura yelled

and shoved him. Boris dropped his rod, waved his arms and fell into the water. Yura did not wait for his brother's revenge and dived in, clothes and all, striking out for the other bank.

I recalled that I was the eldest and bellowed: "Are you crazy? Get out of the water!"

A few minutes later my brothers joined me on the bank. I scolded them, saying it was August and too cold for swimming unless they wanted to get pneumonia. Then, as I bent down for the fish, I slipped. My feet flew out from under me. Before I knew what had happened I was in the water up to my neck.

The boys stood over me with Boris laughing loudly and Yura trying to look distressed as he clucked, "Tut, tut! What a shame! I know you don't care for swimming. What ever made you dive in, Valentin?"

I cursed them and clambered out onto the wet sand.

We really were a sight when we tumbled into the house.

"None of you have any sense!" Mother scolded.

"We'll forgive them this time," Masha said. "It's Sunday and they rarely have a chance to be together."

The fish soup that evening was magnificent.

Once again Yura was leaving home. This time he was going to Orenburg, to enter an Air Force School. Once again Father seemed displeased.

"You've spent twelve years sitting at a desk, studying, wearing holes in your pants. So far you haven't yet done a single day's work. You're still eating your country's bread for free. Don't you like your profession? You're running away from good work, you know.

"I do like my profession," Yura replied. "I like it very much, but planes are for life now. Nothing can change that. Nothing will ever make me give up flying."

We were sitting in the orchard. The apple trees Father had planted the year we had moved to Gzhatsk from Klushino were tall and strong. Their branches were heavy with fruit. As I looked at the trees I realised that ten years had passed since the war had ended and that there had been so many changes in our family since then. Boris was now as old as I had been when Zoya and I had been driven to bondage in Germany. Yura was now older than I had been. The naive boy with a searching mind had grown into a well-built self-confident young man with a strong character. His thirst for knowledge, for knowing about everything new that was happening in this world of ours was unchanged.

But what about Father? He was right in his own way. He was over fifty and had grown visibly older. No one could make him change the views that had guided him through his difficult life.

While Father berated Yura, smoking one cigarette after another, my brother sat listening to him, never once saying a word. Then, finally, he convinced Father with a single phrase.

"I've been called up anyway, Dad. My draft board is sending me to flying school. You see, I've flown a plane and jumped, and I passed my physical. The Board said I was eligible for the Navy or the Air Force. And they decided it would be the Air Force."

Father was silent for a while. "Well, if it's your draft board.... But I still think that after you've flown for a while you'll come down to earth and see what's what."

"Oh, Dad!" Yura rose, went over to him and placed his hands on Father's shoulders. "Do you want me to tell you about a pilot named Grigory Bakhchivanji? He was a Soviet flyer. During the war, in 1942, he tested the world's first jet. Let me tell you about it...."

At that moment I realised that jet planes were Yura's most cherished dream. He had only flown an old YAK-18 at the flying club. We sat talking in the orchard for a very long time that day, for there was still a lot of time until Yura's train departed. Yura spoke with enthusiasm of Bakhchivanji, Kozhedub, his teachers at the flying club Dmitry Martianov and Hero of the Soviet Union Sergei Safonov. These stories impressed Boris and me. They also impressed Father. He could no longer doubt that Yura had chosen his road in life and it was aviation.

PART THREE

A DREAM COMES TRUE

Chapter 1

AN AIR FORCE CADET

I will not be far wrong if I say that boys like our Yura were a find for the Air Force School. The Saratov flying club had not only taught him to fly and jump, it had awakened in him a passion for flying, helping him to choose his future profession and to find his place in life. The years spent at the trade school and the industrial technical school taught him to wear a uniform, instilled in him a feeling of comradeship and collectivism. Such boys were capable of tackling the most difficult everyday problems independently, feeling no need for support in their every step which so often thwarts and does such harm to youths and girls who remain under their parents' wings for much too long. Such minor things as the ability to wear one's uniform and cap correctly, to quickly make up one's bed for inspection are valued in all military units and rid the soldier or cadet from many unpleasant reprimands.

Needless to say, such boys are given preference at the entrance exams. Yura, however, did not have to take them, since he had graduated from the technical school with all "A's".

Thus, he became a cadet of the Orenburg Air Force School. He was overjoyed, for his cherished dream, that of flying a jet fighter plane, would now come true. Yura was proud to have been accepted in this school. Its graduates numbered outstanding aces like Mikhail Gromov, Andrei Yumashev and Anatoly Serov. It was here that Captain Grigory Bakhchivanji, the

world's first test pilot of jet fighter planes, learned his flying skills. Through the years over one hundred and thirty graduates of the school were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

The school had many fine traditions. The cadets acquired a sense of complete devotion to their socialist country and respect for the military achievements of former graduates. The school trained flying aces, men of courage and daring.

Yura wrote to tell us that he had been inducted on January 8, 1956.

I couldn't wait to see him in uniform. However, he was not given leave for quite a long time. Our parents missed him greatly. Meanwhile, Boris had been called up for his Army service. I was away at work all day and could only drop in for a while in the evening. The house seemed empty to them now, and they felt lonely. Mother sought to overcome her longing for her boys in her care of her grandchildren, Zoya's and my children.

Over a year had gone by since Yura's last visit home. The postman brought a greeting card from him just before the November holidays.

"They're too strict there," Mother complained. "Couldn't they have let him come home for a few days? We haven't seen Yura for more than a year."

"That's the service for you," Father explained. "In Peter the Great's time a soldier served for twenty-five years, and he didn't get any leave at all."

Naturally, this bit of history did nothing to improve Mother's mood. However, Yura arrived about three days later. Father phoned me at work to tell me the news.

I met him on the way home. A short, well-built cadet wearing a greatcoat adorned with a sergeant's stripes was coming my way. At the sight of me he saluted smartly and smiled his own wide grin.

We have a picture of Yura taken when he was a sergeant at the Orenburg Air Force School. His hair is cropped and there's that same broad smile of his. That's exactly the way he looked when he came home on leave.

We embraced.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the schoolhouse. I'm feeling nostalgic. I want to have a look at the classrooms and sit at a desk. They've replaced our old tables with desks now. Do you want to come along?"

"No, you go ahead. But don't be long."

Yura spent several days at home. We all noticed the change in him. He seemed very reserved and oblivious of his surroundings. At times I had a feeling that we were strangers. I could not understand what had happened to our Yura of old, that energetic, active, bouncy brother of mine.

"Let me tell you about what happened at the job today," I'd say.

He'd nod for me to go on, but I'd see he wasn't listening. His meetings with his childhood friends and schoolmates did not change his mood any, either.

Mother took Masha aside and said, "I can't imagine what's come over Yura. He's so sad and thoughtful. Maybe he's having trouble at school. Do you think he might be sick? He's not happy at home, and we seem to be strangers. He spends his evenings writing letters to someone."

One day he started packing.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Mother asked anxiously.

"Yes, I am. It's time for me to be going."

"But it can't be. Your leave isn't half up yet."

"It's time, anyway."

Something was driving him from his home, but what could it be? Mother had never pried into our private affairs, for she knew that we would come to her with our troubles ourselves. She was really worried now and so acted as she had never done before, saying, "Sit down, son. I want to talk to you."

Yura sat down reluctantly.

"Tell me what's bothering you. I can't sleep nights seeing you so troubled. Tell me what's wrong."

"You're imagining things. Nothing's wrong. There's a very nice girl that I'm fond of, that's all."

That was the first we heard of Valya Goryacheva. Yura had met her in Orenburg about a year before and had been a frequent visitor at her house. Her parents were very kind and hospitable. Her father, Ivan Stepanovich, was a chef at the Krasnaya Polyana sanatorium. Her mother, Varvara Semyonovna, was a housewife. Valya had two sisters and three brothers. It was a large and happy family. She had graduated from a ten-year school and had worked as a telephone operator. Now she had enrolled in a nursing school.

Yura's confession dispelled Mother's fears, but it brought new doubts. Yura seemed to be serious about the girl. But wasn't it too early for him to be thinking about starting a family? After all, he was still at school himself. But what if that was his intended?

"We'd better start thinking about the wedding then," she said tentatively.

Yura was confused. "Uh.... I haven't proposed yet. I didn't have the nerve to."

"There's only one wish I have and that is if you do marry, I want you to be happy. The sun won't always shine over your door, there will be clouds, too. But I want you to remember this, Yura: always share everything. When you marry it should be for always."

Now we knew the reason for his restlessness. Naturally, we all wanted him to stay on, but we did not detain him. As we said goodbye, Father gave him a piece of commonsense advice: "Finish your studies first. You'll have time to think of marriage after that. When you marry you'll have children, since that doesn't take much brains. But you'll need a head on your shoulders to feed and raise your family. So look before you leap."

I don't know whether Yura really heard what he said or not. He left, to return home on leave again exactly a year later.

Mother, Zoya and Masha were completely engrossed in preparing the wedding feast. The new bride was helping them. Yura and I offered our services, but they shooed us away. "You'd do better to round up the guests," we were told and so set out to call his friends.

Yura was beaming. He had cause to be happy, for two great events had coincided in his life: he had been given an officer's rating and had married a lovely girl!

"Do you like Valya?" he asked.

"She's a fine girl and she's pretty, but you're the one who'll have to live with her."

We walked on for a block or so and he asked me the same question: "What do you think of my Valentina?"

"I told you I liked her," I replied and laughed. "You must be crazy. You keep asking me the same question over and over again."

"I am crazy. I can ask you the same thing a thousand times. I'll bet you're envious. Aren't you?"

It must be human nature, something that is a part of all mankind, for I, too, was as drunk with happiness as he on my wedding day.

We had all taken an immediate liking to Valya. She was sweet and kind, and considerate. There were very many guests at the

wedding. Iraida Dmitriyevna Troitskaya and Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov, his former teachers, both came. Yura was especially glad to see them.

When everyone was seated, with the bride and groom at the head of the centre table and the glasses were filled for the traditional toast to the young couple, something unexpected happened. Father rose, tapped his fork against his glass for attention and, turning to Yura, said, "I'm glad you've got married, son. And I'm glad you're an officer now. But I'd like to know whether your marriage was officially registered and whether you have a certificate about graduating from the Air Force School."

The merry hubbub was snuffed out in a moment. Yura blushed as violently as a schoolboy. I had not seen him so embarrassed in years. Valentina lowered her head.

"Really, Alexei Ivanovich," one of the women said softly.

Yura stuck his hand into his inside breast pocket and handed Father his diploma and marriage certificate.

Everyone present felt terribly ill at ease. I think Father purposely disregarded the general disapproval and slowly read both papers aloud. He then slowly looked at each of the guests in turn and finally addressed the bride and groom. "This makes everything clear. Congratulations, son! Congratulations, daughter! May you always be happy together."

Bespalov was the first to come to his senses. He began to clap. Everyone else began applauding, too. There were shouts of approval and everyone took Father's action as a joke.

Then the glasses clinked, there was singing and dancing, and everyone forgot about the joke. The wedding, as a wedding is supposed to be, was merry and noisy. Yura wanted to remember old times, too, and tried to play the accordion, but since the guests would not leave him alone for a moment, nothing came of it.

Soon, as is always the case at a large, merry wedding, the guests forgot all about the bride and groom. The tables were pushed to the walls and there was general dancing, with the music playing faster and faster. No one noticed when Yura and Valentina slipped out of the house.

Despite the wide-open windows it soon became hot and stuffy inside. I went out onto the porch for a smoke and in the darkness I noticed two figures by the gate. I guessed they were Yura and Valya and was about to turn back into the house when Yura spotted me and called out, "Is that you, Valya? Come on over and join us."

I went down the porch steps and walked over to them. They were standing side by side, resting their hands on the fence. Yura had thrown his jacket over Valya's shoulders.

"That's a good way to catch cold," I said.

Yura laughed. He had been laughing all evening. "No, we won't. We're drunk today, and warm and feel very good. I read someplace that 'Valentina' means good health. So you see, we're not afraid of colds, or of anything else for that matter."

They both laughed happily.

We were silent for a long while, for there are times when there is no need to talk, since everything is clear anyway. Once again I felt awkward, as if I were intruding, and turned to leave. At that moment a shooting star passed blindingly across the sky and burned up without a trace.

"Laika's out there somewheres. A live creature in space," Yura said. "What if...." His words trailed off.

I was not surprised at what he had said, for all of us were still under the spell of the world's second sputnik with Laika aboard it. Ever since November 3rd the papers had been full of pictures of the pointed-eared, likable mutt.

However, Valentina must have sensed something else in his words, for she said, "What 'if'? What were you going to say?"

Yura did not answer at once. After a pause he said, "I was thinking of what Laika was feeling in space. It's frightening even to imagine it. Nothing but stars and a black sky all around. If it had been a man he'd have been able to suppress his fear, say, through willpower, but even though a dog is smart, it's still a dog."

"Would you have gone up?"

I was joking and expected Yura to say, as anyone else would have, "Sure. Why not?" Instead, he replied irritably and, I thought, angrily, "We're talking nonsense. Let's talk about things down on this sinful earth instead."

Valentina said she was frozen and ran inside the house. We stood there for a few more minutes. Then Yura asked me a question which I found difficult to answer.

"Can you tell me why none of the family came to our wedding in Orenburg, Valya?"

"We were going to. And then we sort of decided to have a wedding here, too."

"That's not the reason."

I mumbled something about it being very far away and the trip costing a lot. It didn't sound convincing, and we both felt

awkward from my having lied. But I was sorry for Father and so kept up the lie.

We received the wedding invitation on November 2nd. Father read it and his fist came crashing down on the table. "It's been the way in Russia for centuries that the first wedding is held in the house of the bridegroom's parents," he fumed.

Mother tried to protest, but it was impossible to make Father change his mind.

"I'm the master of this house and no one has any respect for me," he insisted. "You'd think I was dead! The oldest boy went off to get married, and now the second one's done it, too. No, we're not going any place!"

Naturally, I could have disagreed. But I thought to myself that it was a long way to Orenburg, and I'd have to make hasty arrangements about taking my vacation. By neither agreeing nor disagreeing I actually supported Father's stand. And so it came about that none of us went to the wedding in Orenburg. I did not know how to tell Yura about this now so as not to hurt him, and so decided to say nothing.

Several years later we returned to the subject. I mumbled something about the difficulties again, but Yura interrupted me to say, "There wasn't any money for the trip, but there certainly was enough for a second wedding, wasn't there? So, you see, that wasn't the reason."

"All right," I conceded and put my arm around his shoulders. "Let bygones be bygones. Don't hold a grudge against us. Or against Mother and Father. Especially Father. They both love you. And if things don't turn out right sometimes, it's because they do love you so."

"I'm not angry." He punched me lightly in the chest and laughed as he said. "You old-fashioned diehards!"

Chapter 2

THE FAR, FAR NORTH

The young couple spent only four short days in our parents' house. Valentina had to get back to her studies at the nursing school, while Yura had been assigned to a unit in the Far North and was to leave shortly. He told us that he had been given a choice of remaining at the school to teach or of being stationed in the South, but he had chosen the Far North.

"Why?" Valentina had asked when he had told her of his decision. We now repeated the same question.

He tried to laugh it off at first. "There are quite a few reasons. For instance, I'll have a chance to see polar bears at close range instead of at the Zoo. Besides, there's the sea."

However, when we insisted that he tell us the truth he said, "I think a man should begin his career in the service in a place that is most difficult. D'you know what the flyers are like there? They're all aces! I'd like to be like that." Then, sensing that he had not really convinced us, he added, "I'll ask to be transferred to the South when I get old and want to warm my bones in the sun."

To tell the truth, I was a bit envious of his youth, for he was twenty-three, of his restlessness and urgent desire to be where things were most difficult and dangerous. I was even a bit dissatisfied with my own life that was so firmly rooted in Gzhatsk.

Yura's desire to be in his service "where it was most difficult" was realised when he was assigned to an airfield located beyond the Arctic Circle.

One of his first letters home describes the welcome the group of new lieutenants received and how kindly the commanders and the older flyers took them in.

It is always difficult to get used to a new place. However, a group of flyers from the Orenburg Air Force School were starting out there with Yura and being together made things much easier on them. He wrote of this in a letter. He also wrote that many famed flyers had served in the Far North during the war. Twice Hero of the Soviet Union Boris Safonov was one of these.

"He was a handsome and very kind man," Yura wrote. "He flew and fought beautifully, too. Safonov is a legendary figure in the North, but no one here speaks of him as though he's no longer among the living."

I recall a very sad letter in which he wrote of the death of Yura Dergunov in a motorcycle accident. They had become close friends at the Air Force School. Dergunov was a capable flyer. He had been offered an instructor's job at the school, as Yura had been, and could have remained there to teach. However, both Yuras put in applications for the Far North on the day they received their commissions.

The commanders respected Dergunov for his able flying, while his friends liked him for his cheerfulness, sincerity and

willingness to always lend a helping hand. And now a senseless accident had carried him off at the age of twenty-four.

Even in the letter Yura sounded shaken.

He came home on leave again after many months of service. Naturally, we showered him with questions, for we all wanted to learn more about the Far North. Our knowledge of it was limited to the legendary journey of the crew of the *Chelyuskin* in the 30s, to Academician Schmidt and Captain Voronin and Papanin's courageous foursome. Then there were the news dispatches during the war years of the bloody battles waged against the nazis around Murmansk.

"You have to see the Far North to understand what it's like," Yura said. "It's a wondrous land of mountains and moss, moss and mountains. It's daylight for half a year and then night for the other half. It works on your nerves at first, and it's hard to get used to it."

He told us about the snow showers which interfered with flying, of the storms at sea and the slim birches whose roots entwined great boulders. He had to laugh when he said, "When I got my commission they told me I'd probably be eaten by a polar bear if I wasn't careful. But I've never seen a single one yet. Others have, though. I guess I just wasn't lucky. If I hadn't seen any in the Zoo I'd never know what a polar bear was."

As always, his most interesting stories were about his life and his comrades.

"They're made of iron, and that's only right. There's no place for weaklings in the North."

Early in 1959 we received two letters bearing good news. In the first Yura informed us that he had become a candidate for Party membership. We learned from the second letter that our "North Pole" couple were now the proud parents of a daughter, whom they had named Yelena.

We composed a congratulatory telegram together. Mother would not entrust it to anyone and took it to the telegraph office herself. She told every friend and acquaintance on the way the news, and she knew the whole town.

Father's comment was, "Another girl!"

By that time I had three daughters, and Zoya's first child had been a girl.

However, we knew Father was very pleased, for he always respected married people, but had no use for couples who did not have children. Mother lived for the day she would fondle her northern granddaughter.

Father, like so many elderly people, had a habit of saving receipts, notices and bills. It is only due to this habit of his that the money-order receipts for two hundred, two hundred and fifty and sometimes five hundred roubles have been preserved. The rough yellowed slips were held together with a paper clip. The two addresses on them were Gzhatsk and the sender's, both of which were filled in in Yura's hand.

As I look at the slips now I realise that Yura's handwriting hardly changed through the years, remaining practically as it was when he had written his fifth-grade composition. Perhaps the letters had become firmer, more confident. More mature, perhaps. His handwriting hardly changed, but his soul most certainly remained unchanged, never becoming harsh or rough. Yura would never have forgotten about helping his parents, for this was not in his nature.

I leafed through the slips: January, February, March, April.... He had not missed a single month.

Chapter 3

A MYSTERIOUS TRIP

In the spring of 1960 Yura wrote to tell us he was being transferred to the central part of Russia and that he would be stationed a few hours' ride from home. He was going to be a test-pilot.

We were happy at the news, for it was much better to have him and his family close to home than thousands of miles away. We were also pleased to learn that Yura was being entrusted with such an important job. It meant the long months spent in the North had not been wasted. At the same time, we realised that a test-pilot's job was a difficult and dangerous one and so felt anxious. However, we had no way of knowing that he had put in an application for the cosmonaut's group and had passed the initial tests and the difficult medical examination with flying colours.

I recall the time very well. The newspapers and radio were full of stirring dispatches, reports and discoveries.

Two multistage rockets had been launched and were heading towards the Moon, bearing our country's emblem on their sides. A third rocket, having circled the Moon, had photographed its unseen side.

Tsiolkovsky's name was on everyone's lips, gaining him a fame he unfortunately did not live to enjoy.

The entire world was breathlessly following Soviet developments in building and launching spaceships.

The scientists and engineers of the United States were determined to overtake the Soviet Union. The newspapers carried a report that the Americans vere going to launch a man into space.

I think that in those days every Soviet person hoped that a citizen of the Soviet Union would be the first human being in space. Everyone tried to guess whether he would be a scientist, a flyer, an engineer or a doctor.

None of us who were related to or knew Yura ever dreamed that the first man to dare penetrate into the secrets of the Universe would be our own Yura, Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin.

I went out onto the porch early the next morning. I had had a sleepless night, for there had been an "electrical" storm with no rain. I felt broken up and had a splitting headache which made me mad at the world in general.

There, across the low picket fence between our house and my parents' house, I glimpsed a bare-chested man among the apple trees. "What's Dmitry doing with that 40-pound dumbbell so early in the morning?" I wondered. When I came closer I saw it was Yura in the flesh. This indeed was an unexpected visit.

He had not noticed me. He was holding the dumbbell at arm's length and doing knee-bends steadily. It didn't seem as though the night and the terrible storm had worn him out as it had me. Moreover, he must have arrived after midnight and so had had very little sleep.

"One-two! One-two!" I counted. "Are you training for the circus? And would you care to do some work instead of fooling around? Like sawing firewood, for instance."

"Hi, Valya," he replied without turning his head or breaking the rhythm of his exercise. He did a few more knee-bends, set the dumbbell on the ground and walked over to me to shake hands. His handshake, as always, was very firm. Perhaps too firm, and his breathing after such exertion was only slightly more rapid than usual.

"There's nothing to sawing some wood. You wash up and come on over for breakfast. You look a bit creased. What's the matter, got a hangover?"

I shrugged, for I felt too embarrassed to complain about the storm.

At breakfast Yura refused the glass of vodka Father offered him. "There was a time when I could drink, but not any more. Not a single drop until I'm given special permission."

"You test-pilots lead a dull life," I said.

Naturally, the conversation turned to his new job. "Do you do a lot of flying? Are they long flights? Does it tire you out? What kind of new planes do you test?" We showered him with questions.

He tried to answer them. From time to time a mysterious smile would touch his lips. At other times we would sense that he was holding something back and that he felt a bit awkward about it. "Yes, I've been flying. The equipment is all new. I have to get used to it. Actually, I'm doing just that, even more than flying. And I've been jumping some. And studying, and going in for sports. The job is very interesting. There's so much to be done that I wish the day was 48 hours long."

That was Mother's favourite phrase. She, too, would always complain that she needed a 48-hour day to get everything done.

"There's something you're holding back, Yuri Alexeyevich," Father said distrustfully. "Well, you're a soldier and we understand. Do me a favour, though. When you fly your new plane over Gzhatsk, let us know about it. Maybe we'll believe you then."

Yura laughed. He sounded relieved. "All right, Dad. You'll be sure to know when I do take off. There's no doubt about that."

After breakfast we went outside. As Yura picked up the two-handed saw he warned me: "I'll make short shrift of you, my boy. And there you'll be, lying in your coffin so young and handsome...."

"It won't take much effort today," I replied with a sigh.

He stayed for two or three days that time. The two of us split and sawed all the firewood for the winter for the entire family. One morning at dawn we went fishing. Then I recall that a group of boys were playing *gorodki* right in the road near our house. Yura joined them and was soon their idol, since he had a good eye and perfect aim.

From then on he was a frequent visitor at home, always arriving unexpectedly and never staying for long.

Now, years later, I recall Yura's embarrassment when we questioned him about his new job so persistently.

He was really in a fix. Truthfulness was the very essence of his nature. He could never lie, yet his sense of duty prevented him from being frank. After all, he could not divulge a State secret. He was forced to wriggle out of it as best he could and tell us half-truths. "Yes, I've been flying", "Yes, I do some jumping", "Yes, I'm quite active in sports", saying that all this was part of a test-pilot's schedule.

Now we know that the spring, summer and autumn of 1960 were a time of intensive training for the future cosmonauts. They were getting acquainted with their new equipment. At that time the following entry concerning Yura appeared in the medical journal kept on the cosmonauts in training: "He shows a will to succeed, endurance, perseverance, and a strong feeling of comradeship." Besides he was always completely self-possessed, having a high level of intelligence and being "pure in mind and body".

Soon after this visit home Yura became a member of the Communist Party.

The holidays that fall on the anniversary of the October Revolution have always been associated with happy memories in our family. Boris was married on November 7th that year.

Yura and Valya came loaded down with presents and wine. Yura was the life of the party. He said, "Don't be afraid to look people in the eye", to the shy young couple, then smiled and said to Boris, "If you mistreat Aza I'll take care of you, but good."

"I don't think I'll be able to come back for another visit for quite a while," Yura said when they were ready to leave. "We'll be expecting you at our house."

Our parents had long wanted to see Yura and Valya's new home. They began making arrangements for their visit.

"How about celebrating New Year's together? We can go out into the woods and have a picnic under a live fir tree. That does sound tempting, doesn't it? Just think: the woods, the stillness, snow everywhere, and a real live tree!"

We set the date, but for some reason which I cannot now recall we did not visit them at New Year's.

Late in February or early in March of 1961 we had a letter from Yura in which he chided us for not having come and insisted that we come for his birthday. He said that he would

soon be taking Valya to the lying-in hospital and that Mother's help around the house would be greatly appreciated at such a time. He also said he would not take "no" for an answer.

"We'll have to go this time," Father said. "Get the presents ready, Mother."

We saw our parents off, for once again my work prevented me from leaving. We would have to send a telegram them instead.

Father spent about a week at their house.

"Did you have a good time?" we asked him upon his return.

"That's a funny question. Yura's never around. He gets up early and comes home late. I don't know how Valya puts up with him." He sounded quite distressed. "I can't understand what kind of a job he has! You'd think he didn't have a home. There were two happy occasions. Galya was born on the 7th and it was his birthday on the 9th, but we didn't actually get a chance to sit around the table and have a talk. His friends, the other officers, are just as busy. It got me down, so I came home."

Mother stayed on for two weeks to help Valya with the new baby. When she returned on the 27th she said, taking off her shawl and coat, "Yura will soon be going on a trip somewhere very far away."

"Where to?" Father asked.

"I really don't know. He didn't say. When I asked him he sort of hinted that it was farther than anyone had ever been."

"Where is he going? Why didn't you find out?" Father said in an annoyed voice. "I certainly would have."

Though we continued to question her, Mother could not tell us any more of Yura's forthcoming trip.

It sounded very mysterious.

Mother told us about her many talks with Yura, but none of us ever guessed they might have any bearing on his "journey". There was one such talk they had had a few days before Galya was born.

Mother was at home all by herself that day. She had supper ready and sat down to read the paper. Yura came home rather late. He took a shower, changed into a jumpsuit, as he always did at home, and went into the kitchen to have his supper.

"What's so fascinating?" he asked, indicating the article Mother was reading.

"They say here that they've tested a cockpit in which a human being is supposed to fly off into space."

"Mmm..." Yura said vaguely.

"I've been wondering what sort of a person would ever agree to flying that far. I doubt whether they'll ever find anyone foolish enough. He'd really have to be crazy to agree too...."

Her words trailed off as Yura dropped his fork, tilted his chair back and burst out laughing.

"Why do you think he'd have to be crazy?" he asked when he had caught his breath. "I don't think there's anything a fool can do in space."

"Well, you're right about that. But a level-headed person would refuse to have anything to do with such a wild idea. There's no telling if he'd ever come back alive. They sent two dogs into space and they burned up."

Yura set down his fork and knife and spoke seriously now. "You see, Mamma, any new venture is always fraught with risk. So many flyers sacrificed their lives before planes learned to fly. You agree that we need planes, don't you? And we also need space research, both for science and for the economy. I'm sure our spacecraft are reliable. The country is putting a lot of money into space research, so that a fool, as you so nicely put it, cannot be entrusted with a spaceship. That would be throwing money to the dogs."

"I understand that, son. But still, it's very frightening."

Yura did not give himself away in this chance conversation. Moreover, he did not yet know whether he would be the first cosmonaut or not. When he saw Mother off at the station he hinted playfully at a forthcoming trip he was going on that would take him farther than anyone had ever gone before.

The world's first manned spaceflight was only a few short weeks away.

Chapter 4

A MEMORABLE DAY

April 12, 1961 fell on a Wednesday. It began as any other weekday for Yura's family in Gzhatsk. It undoubtedly would have been obliterated in our minds if not for the fact that it was to be the day on which the *Vostok*, piloted by our Yura, was orbited into space. Over twelve years have elapsed since then, yet the events of that April day have not paled.

I was up at about five that morning, for I wanted to be on the job early. Our garage was readying a large number of trucks

for the spring sowing in the virgin lands. I was to drive one of them. However, Masha suddenly fell ill.

I brewed some strong tea. As I washed, dressed and had breakfast I kept worrying about how badly things were turning out.

I had my heart set on this distant journey, but how could I leave my wife alone now that she was sick? A driver must be calm and in good spirits when he's on the road. If he's worried or nervous he becomes accident-prone.

Having finished my breakfast I went outside and bumped into Father. As always, his axe and leather work gloves were stuck into the army belt that was fastened over his old quilted jacket. His fur hat was pushed down low over his forehead.

"Why are you up so early?"

"I've got a lot to do. What about you?"

"I'm going to Klushino."

A team of carpenters from Gzhatsk, headed by my father, were building a new community centre in Klushino.

"The roads are bad now. You know how long it'll take you to walk?"

"I'll get there, don't worry."

We had a smoke together and then, wishing each other good luck, parted. The gloom of early morning had not yet been dispelled. My cheeks burned from the frost as I walked along, with the glassy film of ice that covered the road crunching underfoot. "There's no fog and no wind. That means it'll be a sunny day," I was thinking.

The hot tea or the fast walking warmed me up. My spirits rose. Perhaps Masha would improve by the time I was ready to leave in three or four days. I couldn't believe that she'd still be ill. Then again, my parents were next door. They'd always come over to help.

I was the first one on the job that morning. I went over to my truck. It looked large and cumbersome in the early light of dawn. "We'll soon have you in tip-top shape," I said, slapping the hood. I was busy checking the motor and did not notice how the time flew. When I realised how very hot I was I finally looked up and saw that the sun was high in the blue, cloudless sky.

I decided to go and see how Masha was and have a bite while I was at it. I bumped into Kachanov, our chief, as I was leaving the yard. We greeted each other.

"I hear your wife is sick, Valentin," he said. "Don't worry we'll try to replace you."

"You won't find anyone at such short notice. Never mind, I'll go." We had a smoke and shook hands again.

I told Masha I was worried about leaving her alone with the children.

"I want you to go. My fever's down today. I'm getting better," she said.

I walked slowly back to the garage. My truck was in perfect shape. Now there was nothing for me to do until we departed except help my comrades.

There was a breeze now where all had been still. Oil slick glittered in rainbow hues in every puddle where passers-by or vehicles had broken the crust of ice. It would be grand to be in the fields now, where the smells of the thawing earth were so strong and where the air was blue and pure.

"Daddy!" a child shouted. I turned to see eight-year old Valya, my youngest daughter, running towards me, waving her hands and shouting. I stopped.

"What happened?"

"Hurry, Daddy! Mamma's crying!"

"What?" She had just told me she was feeling better. Was she so upset about my leaving?

"She is listening to the radio and crying."

I ran all the way back home. Once inside, I found Masha by the radio. Tears were running down her cheeks.

"What's the matter?" I'm sure I shouted.

"It's Yura," she said and sobbed. "Listen.... Our Yura's in ... space."

"What are you talking about?" I turned up the radio. We recognised the announcer's voice. It was Levitan. We knew his every inflection. He sounded majestic and joyful now. Of all that he said my mind only reacted to several words: "the pilot ... Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin".

My knees buckled. I sank down onto a chair. "It does sound like our Yura," I said in a whisper.

We listened closely to the TASS dispatch.

"I think it is Yura. Do Mother and Zoya know?"

"Yes. I shouted over to Mother to turn on the radio. When she heard the news she fainted. Zoya and I brought her to. Zoya came back from duty at the hospital just in the nick of time."

"Let's go over there."

They had the radio turned up high. Mother and Zoya sat beside it, pressing close together. Both of them vere weeping.

Masha began bawling at the sight of them. I felt a lump rising in my throat.

"What's he gone and done, Valya?" Mother kept repeating, as if she were talking about a naughty boy. "What's he done?"

"Be still, Mother. It's not good for you to get excited," Zoya said, but was so nervous herself that the water spilled when she brought the glass to her lips with a shaking hand.

"That's the journey he was talking about. And I, fool that I was, called him crazy."

"Mother, please. Try to be calm."

"My goodness!" Mother cried. "What about Valentina? She's all alone there with the babies!"

"I'm sure there's someone with her."

"I don't care. I'm going straight to her."

There was twenty minutes left till train time, and it was nearly three miles to the station. I told Mother to wait for me and ran back to the garage.

Everything was at a standstill there. The drivers, engineers and the chief were all crowding round the radio. They would not listen to anything except Levitan's voice.

"I need a car. It's an emergency!" I shouted in my chief's ear. He looked at me strangely. I had a feeling he didn't even recognise me. Then he turned back to the radio.

I dashed onto the garage, yanked open the door of the first truck standing there and zoomed out of the yard. I don't remember how I got to the house at breakneck speed. I was too late. Mother had left for the station on foot.

I overtook her when she was halfway there. She was running, and her shawl had slipped off her head and onto her shoulders. There was the station. I dashed for the ticket office. We knocked at the closed window. The Moscow train was about to pull out. Mother snatched her ticket and ran towards the train, which had begun to move.

The ticket agent ran out after us, shouting, "Wait! You've forgotten your change!"

We couldn't have cared less. The train was gaining speed. Just then a woman who must have recognised Mother ran over to the ticket agent and spoke to her, sending her back to the dispatcher's office in a flash.

As we watched, the train slowed down and stopped. The conductor helped Mother up. The radio was going full blast in train, too. Mother listened to the dispatch once again and burst into tears again. One of the passengers was from Gzhatsk and recognised her.

"That's Anna Gagarina, the cosmonaut's mother," he said. The news was quickly passed through the car. There was a doctor there and he gave Mother a sedative, but it did not help. When the train reached Mozhaisk everyone learned that Yura had landed safely. Mother nearly fainted again.

Strangers helped her into a cab at Byelorussian Station in Moscow, and she was soon at Yura's house. Valentina was surrounded by newspapermen. They were overjoyed at the unexpected arrival of the cosmonaut's mother.

Having put Mother on the train, I returned to the garage. My friends and co-workers were still crowding round the radio. I went up to my chief and said, "I can't work today. I'm not fit for anything."

"No one feels like working," he replied. "Go on home, Valentin."

Both my house and my parents' house were empty. I was about to set out to search for the family when Vladimir Sirotinin, a reporter for the district paper, appeared.

"Listen, find me a couple of snapshots of your brother, will you?" he said.

I pulled out our family album and a couple of envelopes containing photographs and placed them on the table. "Here, take whatever you need." Then I ran outside.

A boy told me that Masha and the girls were at the neighbours' house watching the news on TV. The house was jammed. I entered at the very moment a photograph of Yura was flashed on the screen.

There could be no doubt now. This was my brother, the brother I had known since he was a week old. Our Yura had orbited into space and had circled the Earth. Memories crowded my mind. There was our wartime dugout, the pot of boiled, frozen potatoes, divided equally among us. The fire at the mill and Father humiliated by the whipping he had got at the Kommandatur. The yard into which we had been herded before being driven off to bondage in Germany. Yura's anguished cry: "They'll kill you, Valya! Run away from them, Valya!" The corridor of the trade school where the teacher had said to Tonya and me, "You've brought us a fine, intelligent boy."

I could contain myself no longer and wept. I was not alone. None of those who had gathered round the set could conceal their tears, either. After all, they had known Yura well. First, as a schoolboy and a Young Pioneer in a red tie made of

Grandfather Timofei's shirt. Then as a trade school pupil in a black school uniform. Then as a flyer. Now they were seeing him as a cosmonaut.

A driver from the district Party Committee entered.

"Comrade Fedorenko wants to see you, Valentin Alexeyevich," he said to me. "The car's outside."

Nikolai Grigoryevich Fedorenko was the First Secretary of the district Party Committee. Zoya and Boris were already there when I arrived. Boris rushed towards me, speaking excitedly, "Valya! What do you say about Yura?"

Nikolai Grigoryevich shook hands warmly and then said, "There's a private office and a phone for each of you. You'll just have to sit there and answer questions. You're the only ones who can answer them."

We took our places. The phones never stopped ringing. There were calls from Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Vladivostok and cities we had never heard of. There were calls from other countries, too. Everyone wanted to know about Yura and our parents. Some were just calling to express their admiration and convey their best wishes. In order to somehow handle the deluge the telephone operators had to warn those who were calling Gzhatsk: "You may only speak for three minutes."

A few hours later, when we were completely exhausted, Fedorenko came to say we had to take a break. The staff manned the phones after that.

At 4 p.m. the telegraph office sent us eighty telegrams from all over the Soviet Union and from abroad. The same words were repeated in most of them: astounding ... amazing ... we are very proud.... The girl at the telegraph office told us the small staff there was snowed under with telegrams for us and that they'd be delivered in bundles every ninety minutes, because it was impossible to deliver them singly as they came in.

All the while newspapermen were storming our parents' house. They arrived by car and train, and some even came in helicopters. The district Party Committee was a veritable beehive of activity.

No sooner had we left the phones than we were surrounded by reporters who bombarded us with questions. We were barely able to keep up with them and to sign autographs. Flashbulbs popped incessantly.

When I finally reached home I found an empty photograph album and a pile of empty envelopes on a chair. There was not a single snapshot left. It was obvious that Vladimir Sirotinin could not have taken them all himself.

While we were running around in Gzhatsk, trying to comprehend and absorb the fantastic news, Father was slowly making his way to Klushino.

It was fourteen long miles to the village. Moreover, he had a bad leg and the spring roads were very muddy. Then there was the cold river to cross. He would be lucky if he didn't have to look for the boatman.

Father walked on slowly but steadily, saving his strength. He passed Ashkovo and was abreast of the last cottage of Fomishchino when a man he knew hailed him.

"Where are you going in all this mud, Alexei?"

"To Klushino. Where else would I be going?" Father replied readily. "We're putting up a community centre for the state farm and we want to have it finished by May Day."

"I see you're not forgetting the old homestead."

"How could I?" Father was happy to stop and chat with an old acquaintance. They were about the same age and had known each other since childhood.

"What's new in the district, Alexei?"

"Nothing, as of this morning."

"That's what I thought when I saw you. My wife came back from the neighbours' and said they'd sent a man up into space. She said she heard it over the radio. She also said that it sounded as if it was none other than your own boy, Alexei."

"Ah, they'll tell you anything," Father replied indifferently, not really paying attention to what his friend had said and missing some of it, since he was hard of hearing.

"That's what I said, too. It's just a lot of talk. When I spotted you I thought I'd come out and ask you myself. You'd know if anyone does."

"Thanks for the tobacco. It's real fine. Well, I'll be going along." When he had taken several steps his friend called after him:

"So you say they didn't send anyone up?"

Father shrugged in annoyance.

He had to cross the river at Zatvorovo. The boatman was at his post. "I've got chilled to the bone waiting for you, Alexei," he said and looked at Father significantly. "Even though the sun's out, it's cold here on the river."

"We'll soon get warmed up, never fear." Father pulled a small bottle of vodka he had brought along especially for the occasion from his jacket pocket. The boatman came up with two pickles and a loaf of bread. Then he got two tin cups from under the seat and they filled them.

"Here's to your boy, Alexei! Bottoms up! May he have an easy flight."

"What are you babbling about?" Father demanded.

The boatman became confused. "Why, I thought this would be your happy day. It wasn't a minute before you came up that I took some people across. See? The oars are still wet. They said that Major Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin was flying around in space."

"In space? What do you know? I'll bet he's a wild devil."

"But it's your son, Alexei!"

"Which son? What are you talking about? You said he's a major, didn't you? Well, my boy's a senior lieutenant, and he has a long, long way to go till he gets to be a major. Besides, I was to visit him just a while back. I didn't notice anything of the kind. But it's nice to know the major's name is Gagarin. Let's drink to his health."

Once across the river, Father continued on his way. Then Klushino appeared on the crest of a hill. No sooner had he entered the cottage where the carpenters' team was boarded than Vasily Biryukov, chairman of the village Soviet, came rushing in. He was out of breath. Before Father knew what was happening, the chairman grabbed him in a bear hug.

"Quit hugging me as if I was a girl!" Father fumed.

"This is the seventh time I've come here!" Biryukov shouted excitedly. "Where were you? Fedorenko has been phoning. He said I was to find you. A helicopter filled with reporters landed here. It made such a racket it scared all the cows. Come on!"

"Where to?"

Biryukov's eyes fairly popped out. "Have you really gone mad in your old age, Alexei Ivanovich, or are you trying to act like a fool? Your son's been on a spaceflight! Fedorenko said he'd kill me if I didn't find you, and you want to know where to! To the district centre, that's where."

It was Father's turn to look astounded. "My son? Are you sure you're not making a mistake?"

"Look at him!" Biryukov sounded exasperated.

"My son? You mean Yura? That means Yura...."

The carpenters were crowding round, congratulating their team-leader. Someone dashed out to get a bottle of vodka. They splashed some into a glass and handed it to Father.

"No thanks," he said. "I'm worse than drunk already." Then suddenly he bowed low to everyone, saying, "Thank you most kindly." He choked on the last word.

"Come on now, Alexei Ivanovich."

"Take it easy."

"Look, boys, why don't you all go outside for a few minutes," Biryukov said.

Father rode a horse to Zatvorovo, then got a ride in a tractor over the muddy road to Ashkovo, where the district committee's jeep was waiting for him.

There were many cars and a great crowd of people outside the house in Gzhatsk. When his neighbours spotted him they all shouted, "Hooray for Alexei Ivanovich!" "Hooray for the cosmonaut's father!"

Fedorenko steered him towards the reporters. Father froze on the threshold, blinded by popping flashbulbs. He looked confused and helpless. Then he tried to answer all the reporters' questions. He was not used to such a noisy crowd or to being the centre of attention of so many people and so kept repeating over and over again: "Thank you. Thank you. I always tried to bring my children up to be good workers."

Fedorenko put an arm around his shoulders. "Take it easy, Alexei Ivanovich. Yura had a good flight and he's landed safely." He took Father aside, then said something to the reporters, who left the room for a while.

Father took off his quilted jacket and work shirt, put on a blue sateen shirt. "Where's Mother?" he asked.

"I put her on the train for Moscow this morning," I replied.

"She should have been here to talk to these fellows, not me," he said regretfully.

It was close to 11 p.m. by then. A messenger came to deliver a Government telegram. The cosmonaut's family was requested to be ready to leave for Moscow.

The cars arrived at midnight and the comrades who were to accompany us asked the reporters to please disperse, but they did not leave the house till after two a.m.

By this time we were thoroughly exhausted and hoarse. We finally sat down to have a bite, our first food since early morning, but we found we were too tense to eat.

"I'll bet Yura's having a feast now and doesn't even know what a madhouse this place is," Boris said.

We put on our best clothes and got into the cars. It was five a.m. Our guide told us that Moscow had been celebrating all day, with crowds of people in the streets heading for Red Square. They bore placards reading: "We're first!" "We've reached the stars!" and "Greetings to Gagarin!" We arrived in Moscow at nine that morning and were taken to a hotel where Mother, Valya and the girls had already been settled.

Our meeting with Yura at Vnukovo Airport was only twenty-four hours away.

Chapter 5

GZHATSK HONOURS A NATIVE SON

Several months passed. We had gradually come to accept the fact that our Yura had actually orbited into space. The excitement of greeting him at Vnukovo Airport had abated. As before, each of us was busy at his own work: Father at his carpentry, I driving a truck and the women taking care of the family.

All of us were waiting for the day when Yura would finally come to visit his home town. At the time he had so many other important tasks to attend to.

The newspapers brought us the following dispatches: "Gagarin in Czechoslovakia", "Yuri Gagarin arrives in Bulgaria as the guest of....", "Yuri Gagarin visits his flying school in Orenburg", "Major Gagarin is in Kaluga, the birthplace of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, father of astronautics, the city which can justly be called the cradle of space research."

Meanwhile, little Gzhatsk patiently awaited its turn and the arrival of its native son. A new cottage was going up across the street from our parents' old house.

We knew that Yura was anxious to come home. At last Yura phoned Mother to say that he would arrive the following day at about three in the afternoon.

The telephone operators who had been listening in on the call did not keep it confidential. An hour later the entire town was talking about Yura's forthcoming visit. The young people, among whom were so many of his childhood friends, were going to meet his car at the Moscow-Minsk Highway and carry him into town on their shoulders as our ancestors had carried Field Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov, the conqueror of the French, into Gzhatsk a hundred and fifty years before. The following morning the local radio station announced that there would be a meeting in the town park at four o'clock in the afternoon in honour of our cosmonaut.

The town looked festive. The park was crowded by one o'clock. Suddenly Fedorenko and several other district officials arrived at our parents' house. The chairman of the district Executive Committee read out the deed by which the Soviet

Government presented the new house across the street as a gift to the cosmonaut's parents. They invited Mother and Father to their new home.

Just then a crowd of children dashed in to shout, "He's coming!"

Several cars pulled up outside.

"We didn't even go out to meet him! And the meeting is scheduled for four o'clock!" Fedorenko moaned.

Yura kissed our parents and embraced the First Secretary. "Never mind, Nikolai Grigoryevich," he said. "My phone call threw everyone off, so I'm to blame. We'll certainly hold the meeting, since it's already been scheduled. I'd like to say that arriving early was a bit of strategy."

"Come, look at the house they've built for Mother and me, son!" Father interrupted.

"Let's. You and Mother should have at least a good two hundred years here, Dad. You can't settle for any less. And it'll be a good life."

They inspected the two cozy rooms, the kitchen, bath and large veranda. There was a small apple orchard in back of the house.

Our parents were very touched. I heard Yura say with a catch in his voice, "Come on, Dad. You're an old soldier. Get a hold on yourself. Come on, everyone's waiting for us."

They were indeed. There was a crowd outside in the yard. Yura's friends were all there. Young Pioneer group came marching up with drums rolling and bugles playing and a banner waving in front. Then girls dressed in their best and carrying huge bouquets of flowers came over.

"It seems we might hold the meeting here," Fedorenko said.

Yura's friends all wanted to greet him personally. The girls all wanted to have their picture taken with him and his autograph and the Young Pioneers invited him to attend assembly.

"Which school are you from?" Yura asked.

"From your old school."

"Then I'll certainly be there."

As soon as the crowd thinned Mother invited Yura and the comrades who had accompanied him from Moscow to come in and have dinner. They were just seated round the table when Boris arrived.

"There's a delegation of old ladies to see you, Yura," he said.

About a dozen old women were standing near the gate. Despite the heat they all had on dark shawls. They stood there,

some of them bent over and leaning on their canes, watching the house. Yura recognised them.

"Why, those are the old ladies from our street. There's Auntie Manya and there's Maria Petrovna. I'll have to go out to speak to them or they'll feel hurt." He went out quickly.

"Hello, everybody," Yura said cheerfully. "Don't stand out here. Please come in."

"We don't mind."

"The sun's good for old bones."

"We've come to have a look at you, son."

Maria Petrovna, urged on by her cronies, came forward.

"Tell us, Yura, did you see Him?"

"Whom?"

"Him. The Lord. And how did He ever let you get so close to Him?"

Yura laughed heartily. "No, I'm sorry to say I didn't see anyone. In fact, I don't think there was anyone to see to begin with."

The old ladies held a whispered conference.

"Why don't you want to take off your cap, Yura?" Auntie Manya asked.

"Excuse me," Yura said in an embarrassed voice, feeling that he had been impolite to stand there talking to them in his cap. He tore it off and tossed it onto the fender of a car. Maria Petrovna quickly raised her hand and yanked at a lock of his hair.

"Hey, that hurts!" Yura cried in mock horror.

Maria Petrovna became so confused that tears welled up in her eyes. "Excuse us, Yura, but there's been so much talk, you know. They said that the Lord punished you and took off all your hair, and that you had to wear a wig made of dog's hair. But this is your own hair."

We had all come out onto the porch some time before and at this there was a loud burst of laughter.

"Don't tell me you believe all the nonsense you hear?" Yura said. "Tell me who invented such a thing," he demanded merrily.

Maria Petrovna had regained her composure by then. "Who knows who started the rumour. Maybe we did ourselves. We sit around and gossip and goodness knows what we can think up. So it's not true at all."

"No, it isn't."

"Don't you worry, Yura. If I hear any more rumours about you I'll stop them straightaway. I'll say I spoke to you myself,

and that you're my neighbour and I've seen for myself that you're just the same as you were when you were a boy. There's not a single hair missing from your head."

Yura was very amused by this talk. "You know what," he promised with a twinkle in his eye, "when we start flying more often we might even take you up. What do you say to that?"

"If I was younger I'd certainly agree. Why, I'd go anywhere with you, Yura," she said.

The meeting in the town park began precisely at four. When Yura appeared on the speaker's platform they wouldn't let him utter a word for nearly ten minutes. Everyone clapped and waved posters and flags, shouting:

"Long live the first cosmonaut!"

"Hooray for Soviet science!"

"Hooray for Yuri Gagarin!"

"Good for you, Yura! You put Gzhatsk on the space map!"

There were a couple who shouted: "Don't get stuck-up, Gagarin!"

"Don't forget your old friends, Yura!"

In vain did Yura raise his hand for silence. Then he put his arm around his old teacher, Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov, and said something to him. In a moment everyone was still.

"I don't see anything very special in what I have done, comrades," Yura said. "Every one of you would have done the same in my place. I only fulfilled the wish of my great people, the people who brought me up and trained me for this flight. I want to express my sincere thanks to my people, to you, my fellow townsmen, to all the Soviet people. I want to thank my teachers especially. This is Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov, a physics teacher. He was the first to teach us schoolchildren to love this wonderful science. He was the first to introduce us to Tsiolkovsky. Who knows, perhaps if I hadn't had such a teacher as he in school I might never have become a cosmonaut." Here he embraced Bespalov again.

There were many of his pupils in the crowd. In fact, it would be difficult to find a single person in Gzhatsk who did not know Bespalov. One can imagine the ovation that followed Yura's words.

He went on to tell us of his experiences during the flight and of how he felt inside the spaceship. He told us of the warm reception the people of Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria had given him. He answered dozens of questions. In the end

the meeting turned into a warm, neighbourly talk that lasted for several hours.

Yura returned from the meeting arm-in-arm with his parents. Both Mother and Father each carried a bouquet of flowers and I noticed how ill-at-ease Father felt carrying them. He was probably thinking that it was much more fitting for him to be carrying an axe.

A huge crowd walked them to the house and milled about for a long while after.

"Let's sneak off and go fishing tomorrow morning," Yura whispered.

"Fine. I've got everything ready," I replied.

Early the next morning we went off to the river to fish and returned rather late. However, the next morning Yura was up very early again.

"You could have slept a little longer," Mother chided fondly.

"It's a shame to sleep through a morning like this. I'll bet Dad's been up for hours."

"He's getting old, and old people don't need much sleep. He's out feeding the chickens."

Yura drank a mug of fresh milk. "This is cosmic food. You know, I'm supposed to speak at the school today, Mamma, and I feel a bit nervous about it."

"What a thing to worry your head about! Just tell them anything."

"No, I can't do that. You know, I really am nervous. I never thought I would be."

Then Lev Mikhailovich phoned and said the school auditorium wasn't big enough, because the children of the town's other schools wanted to meet the cosmonaut, too. The meeting would therefore be held at the cultural centre.

"See how many of them there'll be, Mamma? They'll tear me to pieces." He took great pains in pressing his shirt and trousers and when he was all ready he looked in the mirror to see whether his medals were on straight.

"Well, I'll be going."

I bumped into him as he was leaving.

"You know, Valya, the meeting's going to be held at the cultural centre, but I want to go over to the school first. I want to sit at a desk in my old classroom."

"Want me to go along?"

He smiled shyly. "You'd better come straight to the centre, Valya. Don't be mad at me. It's just a whim. I want to sit at a desk there all by myself."

He headed towards the schoolhouse, certain that at this early hour he would find no one there but the janitor. He was mistaken. The school was humming from a multitude of children's voices. Young Pioneers in white shirts and red ties shouted excitedly and flocked towards him. Then they accompanied him to the teachers' room. All the teachers were there, too.

"Just as I thought," Lev Mikhailovich said. "I knew you wouldn't be able to sit around at home and would come here earlier. As you see, I wasn't the only one to deduce this." He took Yura to the physics room. "We've acquired some new equipment these past years and the children have made quite a lot of things themselves. Do you recognise this?" He pulled a model plane with a small gasoline engine from behind one of the cupboards. It was one of the many models the pupils of "6A" had made under his guidance so many years before.

"Everything comes full circle," Yura said. Who knows what he was thinking as he stood there for a long while holding the model plane.

Lev Mikhailovich said that they did not speak again while they remained there. Then Yura went to his old classroom where he sat at a desk all by himself in the empty room.

The Young Pioneer assembly was held at the cultural centre. Yura was elected an honourary Young Pioneer. One of the children tied a red tie on him. After that the boys and girls flocked into the auditorium. No amount of stern words on the part of the teachers or pleading for discipline to be maintained could restrain the children. They rushed to take seats in the front rows, to be closer to the stage.

I think Yura quailed at the sight of so many wide-open young eyes staring at him.

"What am I supposed to say to them? Fine words won't impress them."

"Don't worry," Lev Mikhailovich said, trying to bolster his courage. "It'll all be clear in a moment. Children are like that. They'll help you out themselves. They have a million questions they want to ask you."

That's exactly how things turned out. They had enough guestions to fill a book. I have a stenotype of the meeting, but I'd rather tell it as I remember it myself.

First, a boy of about ten rose and said in a voice quavering from excitement, "Were you very scared when you were out there in space, Yuri Alexeyevich?"

An angry rumble rose over the rows. The children could not

agree with the boy, for they felt that a cosmonaut would never be afraid of anything.

"Listen to him!"

"Sit down and think of something better to say."

Yura had left the rostrum and was now standing at the edge of the stage. He raised his hand for silence, and when he did speak his words astounded most of them.

"It was a bit scarey, you know. I don't think there are any people in this world who are not afraid of anything. But what's important is to be able to overcome your fears. Well then, when I began feeling funny, I said to myself: 'Stop! Take it easy! Remember your training. You've checked the equipment. If you've agreed to test something that's of such great importance to your country you cannot and have no right to be afraid.' Do you agree?"

"Yes!" everyone shouted.

Then there were other questions.

"How can somebody become a hero?"

"What does it take to be a real man?"

"Which hero or great man do you try to be like?"

Yura became completely relaxed and answered each question thoroughly and with a touch of humour. The children laughed at every joke, and this meeting, too, turned into a friendly talk.

"Were you a Young Pioneer?"

"Certainly! You know, those were the best years of my childhood. We had a very good Young Pioneer organisation in school. We put on amateur shows and went on hikes, and helped the state farm at haying time. We also built model gliders and planes and read books about Chkalov and other heroic flyers. That was when I decided to be a flyer. Do many of you want to be flyers?"

"We all do!" someone shouted.

Yura smiled. It was quite natural that every boy and girl in the auditorium that day wanted to grow up to be a flyer.

"I've just had a brainstorm," Lev Mikhailovich whispered to me. "What if we organise a young cosmonauts' club and ask Yura to be its leader? There certainly should be such a club in Gzhatsk. Do you think he'd agree?"

"You'd know that better than me. After all, he was your pupil. Why don't you ask him right now? Here, in front of everybody. He won't be able to refuse this way."

"That's exactly what I'll do," Bespalov said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

A thin, freckle-faced girl in the front row raised her hand and said, "Uh, I'd like to know whether we ... whether women will be flying spaceships, too."

A dead silence settled on the auditorium. I think that every little girl there, as well as all the women present, waited expectantly for his answer. Then a boy's voice rang out.

"Ha! Girls'll never fly spaceships!"

"But I'm quite positive that they will. Dead certain, in fact," Yura replied.

There was a storm of applause that seemed to last forever.

When someone else asked him what he hoped to do in the future, Yura replied, "Very much. Every person should have a dream. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin urged us to learn to dream, for otherwise there can be no progress. My most cherished dream is to fly to the Moon, to Mars and to Venus."

As we walked back home I could see how stirred Yura was. He kept saying, "What a wonderful bunch of kids they are. Did you see what those kids are like?" He liked children very much.

I will go ahead of my story and say that a Young Cosmonauts' Club was founded in Gzhatsk soon after, with Lev Mikhailovich Bespalov in charge. We have dozens of snapshots of Yura at club meetings, surrounded by the young cosmonauts. These children have long since grown up and graduated from school and college, too. Who knows but that some of them are not treading the same paths that our Yura once did.

EPILOGUE

In the Autumn of 1962 my family and I moved to the city of Ryazan.

Yura would visit me there, and each time he tried to come unannounced. However, he was always recognised by the highway patrol men, by my neighbours when he approached or drove up to the house, and by children in the street. And then the flow of visitors, both wanted and unwanted, would commence. This was very trying for him and he would become weary, but he never complained. He was always his own sincere self, approachable always to all.

He first visited us in the autumn. He put on a civilian suit, pulled the brim of his hat low down over his eyes and we set out for a walk together. When we reached the embankment of the

Oka River we stood there for a long while, gazing at the walls and towers of the Ryazan Kremlin, at the high bell-tower of the Cathedral of the Assumption which rose slim and graceful nearby. The rays of the setting sun, reflected in the gold cupolas of the ancient structures, blinded us. The wind tossed russet leaves at our feet.

"You know," he said, "I've been standing here, looking at the Kremlin, and it's given me a very warm feeling. There are so many kremlins in Russia. The Moscow Kremlin, and the ones in Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakhan and Rostov. Our cities are firmly rooted."

Some men I worked with at the plant joined us. A photographer from the local paper suddenly showed up as they have a way of doing and started snapping pictures. The conversation became lively and jumbled. Then we set out for home, surrounded by a crowd of shouting children. Yura had his picture taken with them. He spoke about characters from Russian folklore associated with Ryazan and recited a poem by Sergei Yesenin, who was from these parts.

Past me there sweep in hectic flight
Grey clouds, a dark day's tousled tresses....
The sadness of approaching night
Upon my heart, resistless, presses.

Down to the very church domes drops
The hazy veil of dusk and twilight....

"Listen to the words," he said. "They're so simple and so powerful. Let's go over to his birthplace, Valya. Konstantinovo isn't very far from here. I carry Yesenin around with me here," he said and touched his heart. "And I know every line of *Anna Snegina* by heart."

The following day we went to my cottage in the country. Yura took off his shirt, baring his tanned back to the cool sun as he marked out the ground for a future orchard and vigorously dug the holes for the apple trees. He also chose the whips from those my neighbour offered me.

Each spring the apple trees Yura planted become covered with delicate pale-pink blossoms. In autumn their branches are heavy with fruit.

After his first visit he told me that he had become attached to Ryazan and was happy to know that I would be living in this fine, ancient Russian city.

It was a turbulent spring of bright sunshine and of everything in bloom when Yura came to Ryazan the next time.

We sat up talking all through the night, speaking of things two brothers who are very close might speak of when they are alone together. We recalled our childhood, the war, Klushino and Gzhatsk.

"It's a good thing a person's mind can retain so much," Yura said. "If he had no memory and forgot his past, a person would never be able to live for the present. Or for the future, either."

It was nearly dawn when we finally went to bed, and it was not yet noon when the bell rang. Yura was the first one up. He put on his blue jumpsuit and went to open the door.

Boris Zhavoronkov and Sasha Arkhipov were standing outside.

"These are our Ryazan poets, Yura," I said.

"Two poets in Yesenin's homeland. This is excellent. Come on in, boys. You're just in time for breakfast. And poetry, too."

They stood there hesitantly. Then Boris Zhavoronkov said, "Doesn't he look just like himself!" and entered.

Sasha pulled a book from his pocket and said, "We'd like to present you with this collection of our poems, Yuri Alexeyevich."

"Thank you both. Let's see, *Road to the Stars.* Well, this is really interesting. Only dreamers like poets and cosmonauts can see the stars at close range. I think that cosmonauts have a lot in common with poets, because they are dreamers. Come on in."

When we were seated round the table Zhavoronkov pulled out a bottle of cognac and said with great bravado, "Ah, Yuri Alexeyevich, let's have a drink. We're all poor mortals."

"You're mistaken, Boris. I'm immortal. At least that's what our Chief Designer, Sergei Korolyov, said about me," Yura said and grinned broadly.

That is how we all remember him.

Klushino-Gzhatsk-Ryazan
1969-1970

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